

# Promoting Partnerships for Student Success

## Lessons from the SSPIRE Initiative



**Evan Weissman  
Oscar Cerna  
Christian Geckeler  
Emily Schneider  
Derek V. Price  
Thomas J. Smith**

**July 2009**



Funding for this report was provided by the James Irvine Foundation.

Dissemination of MDRC publications is supported by the following funders that help finance MDRC's public policy outreach and expanding efforts to communicate the results and implications of our work to policymakers, practitioners, and others: The Ambrose Monell Foundation, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Carnegie Corporation of New York, The Kresge Foundation, Sandler Foundation, and The Starr Foundation.

In addition, earnings from the MDRC Endowment help sustain our dissemination efforts. Contributors to the MDRC Endowment include Alcoa Foundation, The Ambrose Monell Foundation, Anheuser-Busch Foundation, Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Ford Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, The Grable Foundation, The Lizabeth and Frank Newman Charitable Foundation, The New York Times Company Foundation, Jan Nicholson, Paul H. O'Neill Charitable Foundation, John S. Reed, Sandler Foundation, and The Stupski Family Fund, as well as other individual contributors.

The findings and conclusions in this report do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the funders.

For information about MDRC and copies of our publications, see our Web site: [www.mdrc.org](http://www.mdrc.org).

Copyright © 2009 by MDRC.<sup>®</sup> All rights reserved.

## Overview

California's 110 community colleges are an essential part of the state's higher education and workforce development structure, serving over 2.6 million students annually. But a growing number of students face major obstacles to success, including inadequate preparation for college-level courses, and many end up dropping out. New scholarship suggests that student support services, such as academic and personal advising, counseling, tutoring, and financial aid, are critically important for promoting better academic outcomes for students. The challenge is to integrate these support services with academic instruction. Unfortunately, the very way most community colleges are organized — with student services housed in one division and academic functions in another, each functioning in parallel but with little coordination — creates obstacles to successful integration. These obstacles are often exacerbated by competition between the divisions for limited budget resources.

To help overcome this divide, the Student Support Partnership Integrating Resources and Education (SSPIRE) initiative was funded by the James Irvine Foundation and coordinated by MDRC. SSPIRE aimed to increase the success of young, low-income, and academically underprepared California community college students by helping community colleges strengthen their support services and better integrate these services with academic instruction. Nine California community colleges were selected to participate in SSPIRE, and each received as much as \$250,000 in total from 2006 through early 2009. There was no uniform SSPIRE program; rather, each college proposed its own approach to integrate student services and instruction, based on campus needs and objectives. The grant funds enabled each college to support strategies that served approximately 100 to 1,000 students per year and to simultaneously identify and expand promising practices and look for ways to sustain their programs with existing college revenues.

This report describes how the SSPIRE colleges implemented four basic approaches to integrating student services with instruction: learning communities, a “drop-in” study center, a summer math program, and case management programs. Each college supplemented the SSPIRE funding with its own contributions, and all the colleges reached disadvantaged students on their campuses, an important goal of the initiative. The report also presents some of the colleges' own data, which suggest that SSPIRE services may have led to modest improvements in students' course pass rates and persistence in college.

Finally, this report offers cross-cutting lessons drawn from MDRC's research on the initiative. These lessons present practitioners and policymakers across the state and nation with examples from well-implemented programs that integrated student services with academic instruction. Though the changes the SSPIRE colleges made were mostly incremental, the initiative resulted in new programs and practices on each of the campuses. Other institutions of higher education seeking to integrate student services with academic instruction may look to these examples to see that this integration is possible, if not always easy, to achieve. Most important, this report offers hope that more students at these California colleges and elsewhere will receive the information, guidance, and support they need to persist in college and reach their academic goals.



# Table of Contents

<b>Overview</b>		iii
<b>List of Tables, Figures, and Boxes</b>		vii
<b>Preface</b>		ix
<b>Acknowledgments</b>		xi
<b>Executive Summary</b>		ES-1
 <b>Chapter</b>		
<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	1
	The Community College Landscape	2
	Why Integrate Student Services and Instruction?	5
	The SSPIRE Colleges and Programs	8
	Support for the SSPIRE Programs	12
	Evaluation in SSPIRE	13
	Moving Beyond SSPIRE	14
	Sources of the Data in This Report	14
	Report Overview	15
<b>2</b>	<b>Infusing Student Services into Learning Communities at Five SSPIRE Colleges</b>	17
	Overview of the SSPIRE Learning Communities	18
	Characteristics of Students in the Five Learning Community Programs	21
	The SSPIRE Learning Communities in Operation	23
	Analyzing Data to Inform Learning Community Program Improvement	34
	Integrating Student Services: Maturity and Growing Pains for Learning Community Programs	40
	The Future of SSPIRE Learning Communities	41
<b>3</b>	<b>Creating a Drop-In Study Center: Merced College’s Story</b>	45
	An Overview of Study Central	45
	Study Central in Operation	46
	The Future of Study Central	55
<b>4</b>	<b>Building the Summer Math Jam and Fall Lifelines Program for Incoming Freshmen at Pasadena City College</b>	59
	An Overview of Math Jam/Lifelines	60
	Math Jam/Lifelines in Operation	61
	The Future of Math Jam/Lifelines	70

<b>5</b>	<b>Using a Case Management Approach to Enhance Student Services for Underserved Students at Taft and Victor Valley Colleges</b>	73
	An Overview of the SSPIRE Programs at Taft and Victor Valley	73
	Taft and Victor Valley’s Case Management Programs in Operation	76
	Program Assessment and Improvement	81
<b>6</b>	<b>Lessons and Conclusions from the SSPIRE Initiative</b>	85
	Lessons from Well-Implemented Programs	86
	Using Data to Understand Student Progress	89
	What’s Next? Assessing the Potential for Growth, Sustainability, and Institutional Change	91
	<b>Appendix</b>	
	Research Methods and Data Sources	95
	<b>References</b>	99

# List of Tables and Figures

## Table

ES.1	SSPIRE College Program Approaches	ES-3
1.1	SSPIRE College Program Approaches	11
2.1	Demographic Characteristics of Learning Community Students, Compared with All Students at Five SSPIRE Colleges (Academic Years 2006-2007 and 2007-2008)	22
2.2	Costs of Santa Ana College’s Learning Communities (Academic Year 2007-2008)	29
2.3	Costs of College of Alameda’s Learning Communities (Academic Year 2007-2008)	30
2.4	Learning Community Practices and Compensation at Five SSPIRE Colleges (Academic Year 2007-2008)	32
2.5	Outcomes for Students in De Anza College's Developmental Reading and Writing Learning Communities, Compared with Students in Stand-Alone Developmental Reading and Writing Courses, By Semester of Enrollment	37
3.1	Demographic Characteristics of Study Central Sample, Compared with All Merced College Students (Academic Year 2007-2008)	48
3.2	Costs of Merced College’s Study Central (Academic Year 2007-2008)	53
3.3	Outcomes for a Sample of Developmental-Level Students in Study Central, Compared with All Students Who Attempted the Same Developmental Classes (Academic Year 2007-2008).	56
4.1	Demographic Characteristics of Math Jam Participants, Compared with All Pasadena City College Students (Academic Years 2006-2007 and 2007-2008)	63
4.2	Costs of Pasadena City College’s Math Jam/Lifelines (Academic Year 2007-2008)	67
4.3	Outcomes for Students in Pasadena’s Math Jam Who Enrolled in Developmental Math Courses, Compared with All Students Who Enrolled in Developmental Math Courses, By Semester of Enrollment	69
5.1	Key Elements of Taft College’s and Victor Valley College’s SSPIRE Programs	75
5.2	Demographic Characteristics of SSPIRE Participants at Taft College and Victor Valley College, Compared with All Students (Academic Years 2006-2007 and 2007-2008)	77
5.3	Costs of Taft College’s and Victor Valley College’s SSPIRE Programs (Academic Year 2007-2008)	80

## Figure

1.1	The SSPIRE Colleges: Location and Enrollment	9
-----	--	---





## Preface

In today's economy, a college degree has become an important credential for success in the labor market. But while community colleges offer a path to higher education for millions of low-income and traditionally underserved students, only about a quarter of the 2.6 million students who attend California's 110 community colleges receive a degree or certificate or transfer to a four-year college within six years. Policymakers, practitioners, and researchers are increasingly focusing on raising the rates of college completion among these students and others like them across the country. It is generally assumed that students who are underprepared for college-level work can benefit from improved instruction, particularly in developmental, or remedial, English and mathematics courses. But research suggests that high-quality student support services, such as academic and personal advising, counseling, tutoring, and financial aid, are also critically important in improving students' academic outcomes. The challenge is to integrate these support services with academic instruction.

To meet this challenge, the James Irvine Foundation funded and MDRC coordinated the SSPIRE Initiative: Student Support Partnership Integrating Resources and Education. In 2006, nine colleges received SSPIRE grants of up to \$250,000 each over three years to institute or expand a variety of approaches to integrate student services and academic instruction. These included revising curricula and training faculty to incorporate student services in their classrooms; offering an informal summer math class to help students prepare for college in the fall; creating a "drop-in" center where students can study, meet other students, and approach faculty in an informal setting; and providing more personalized, targeted counseling and tutoring services. "Learning communities," in which cohorts of students take several linked courses together, were central to the initiative at many of the colleges

This report documents how the colleges developed their programs, used data on students to plan and improve their interventions, and identified ways to sustain their efforts after the SSPIRE funding ended. It also draws some practical lessons from programs and practices that succeeded in integrating student services with academic instruction. We hope that the experiences of these community colleges in California will offer some useful guidance for other institutions that are seeking to provide low-income students with the support they need to persist in college and reach their academic goals.

Gordon L. Berlin  
President



## Acknowledgments

The Student Support Partnership Integrating Resources and Education (SSPIRE) initiative was made possible by the generous support of the James Irvine Foundation. In particular, we would like to thank Anne Stanton and Rogéair Purnell for their support of the programs and of MDRC's role in the initiative.

MDRC would also like to thank the many faculty, staff, and administrators at the SSPIRE colleges who worked with us throughout the initiative and — most importantly — kept the success of their students at the forefront of their efforts. There is not enough space to mention everyone who has played a key role in the program, but we particularly want to thank the individuals at each college who saw the program through most or all of the three-year initiative: Leland Thiel, Rodney Siegfried, Jeanne Campanelli, and Pauline Fountain at American River College; Jannett Jackson, Brenda Bias, and Kelly Pernell at College of Alameda; Christina Espinosa-Pieb, Marcos Cicerone, and Edwina Stoll at De Anza College; Susan Flatt and Sonya Severo at Merced College; Lyssette Trejo-Espinoza at Mt. San Antonio College; Brock Klein, Lynn Wright, and Jay Cho at Pasadena City College; John Acuña, Todd Huck, and Micki Bryant at Santa Ana College; Ruben Arreola, Sharyn Eveland, and Vicki Herder at Taft College; and Eartha Johnson and Victoria Hindes at Victor Valley College. Their contribution to the programs and their participation in MDRC's research made this initiative possible.

The authors would also like to thank a number of our partners and colleagues. To help us understand students' experiences at the SSPIRE colleges, Jordan Horowitz, Nathan Pellegrin, Nick Wade, and Terrence Willett at Cal-PASS helped gather and analyze student records data, and Christine McLean and others at CCSSE helped gather and analyze student and faculty surveys. Our colleagues in Partners for Strong Community Colleges have helped shape our understanding and interpretation of the SSPIRE initiative in the larger context of community college experiences and reform across the state and nation. In particular, Rose Asera, Linda Collins, and Norton Grubb have provided useful insight on the experiences and challenges that community colleges face, and on the ways in which funders, researchers, and other intermediaries can help these colleges — and the students they serve — reach their full potential.

At MDRC, the SSPIRE team worked collaboratively on nearly every aspect of the initiative; in addition to the report's authors, Michelle Ware was an invaluable part of our team, and we thank her for her wide-ranging contributions to the project and for her advice and reviews of this report. Bethany Miller played a key role in working with the colleges in the first years of the program, and Ileri Valenzuela-Vergara served as a sounding board for thoughts on the implementation of community college initiatives. Thomas Brock and Robert Ivry provided valuable advice and guidance throughout. Fred Doolittle and John Hutchins reviewed this report and

provided sharp “outside” perspectives. And finally, we would like to thank Margaret Bald, Susan Blank, David Sobel, and Stephanie Cowell for their assistance in the report publication process.

While much of this report focuses on the SSPIRE faculty, staff, and administrators who implemented and operated the programs over the course of the initiative, neither the programs nor this report would exist without the many students involved. We would like to thank all of the students for their participation in the SSPIRE programs, and in particular those who answered surveys, participated in focus groups, or allowed us to observe their interactions with faculty and staff on the campuses. We hope that this report will be used to strengthen college programs and services for these students and others in the future.

The Authors

## Executive Summary

California's 110 community colleges are an essential part of the state's higher education and workforce development structure, serving over 2.6 million students annually. But a growing number of students face major obstacles to success, including inadequate preparation for college-level courses and competing work and family obligations. As a result, many students drop out of college before they attain the credentials necessary to reach the next step in their education or to compete successfully in the labor market. Of California community college students seeking a degree or certificate, only about one-quarter receive their degree or certificate, or transfer to a four-year college, within six years.

Across the nation, policymakers and educators are rightly concerned about strategies to improve instruction — particularly in developmental English and mathematics courses, where many students struggle to learn basic skills needed for college. But new scholarship suggests that, to be most effective, support for developmental-level learners should not be limited to the classroom. Student support services, such as academic and personal advising, counseling, tutoring, and financial aid, are also critically important for promoting better outcomes for students. The challenge is to integrate these support services with academic instruction. Unfortunately, the very way most community colleges are organized — with student services housed in one division and academic functions in another, each functioning in parallel but with little coordination — creates obstacles to successful integration. These obstacles are often exacerbated by competition between the divisions for limited budget resources.

To help overcome this divide, the Student Support Partnership Integrating Resources and Education (SSPIRE) initiative was funded by the James Irvine Foundation and coordinated by MDRC. SSPIRE aimed to increase the success of young, low-income, and academically underprepared California community college students by helping community colleges strengthen their support services and better integrate these services with academic instruction. Following a competitive process, nine California community colleges<sup>1</sup> were selected to participate in SSPIRE, and each received as much as \$250,000 in total from 2006 through early 2009. There was no uniform SSPIRE program; rather, each college proposed its own approach to integrate student services and instruction, based on campus needs and objectives.

Throughout the three-year grant period, MDRC provided the colleges with technical assistance to help them implement their programs, conduct data-based assessments, and make

---

<sup>1</sup>The nine community colleges were: American River College, College of Alameda, De Anza College, Merced College, Mt. San Antonio College, Pasadena City College, Santa Ana College, Taft College, and Victor Valley College.

needed program improvements. MDRC also organized annual meetings and other opportunities for faculty and staff from all nine colleges to learn from the efforts of other colleges. SSPIRE can be characterized as a pilot initiative, in which the grant to each college was meant to support an innovative program and promising practices that could serve as models of integration on the campus. The grant funds enabled each college to support strategies that served approximately 100 to 1,000 students per year and to simultaneously identify and expand promising practices and look for ways to sustain their programs with existing college revenues.

This report documents each of the SSPIRE colleges' program practices and experiences; presents some of their own data documenting students' experiences and academic progress during and after the program; and offers cross-cutting lessons drawn from MDRC's research. It focuses on how the colleges developed their programs; used student data to plan, assess, and improve their interventions; and planned for sustaining their efforts after the SSPIRE funding ended. The primary sources of data for the report are MDRC's structured interviews with faculty, staff, and students; observations of the programs; and ongoing communications with the program coordinators. Some quantitative data were also collected to supplement these qualitative findings.

## **What Programs Did the SSPIRE Colleges Develop?**

The nine SSPIRE colleges implemented four basic approaches to integrating student services with instruction: learning communities, a “drop-in” study center, a summer math program, and case management programs (see Table ES.1). Each college supplemented the SSPIRE funding with contributions of its own, and all of the colleges reached disadvantaged students on their campuses, an important goal of the initiative.

- **The most popular approach (used by five colleges) was learning communities, in which cohorts of students take two or more courses that are linked together, with shared curriculum and course content.**

American River College, College of Alameda, De Anza College, Mt. San Antonio College, and Santa Ana College integrated student services into learning community classrooms in two ways. In the first model, two or more academic courses were linked in learning communities, and colleges then modified curricula to incorporate student services and assigned counselors and others to work with students in the courses. For example, a writing instructor would invite a counselor to talk to a class about the college's support services, and students would then write an essay describing one of these services. In the second model, colleges linked a counselor-taught “student success” course with an academic course: An academic instructor and a counseling instructor would work together to create joint assignments that related directly to the content in both classes, such as a math assignment based on students' financial aid applications.

## Student Support Partnership Integrating Resources and Education

### Table ES.1

#### SSPIRE College Program Approaches

---

##### *Learning Community Programs*

---

**American River College** restructured developmental-level reading and writing courses into a single, team-taught, 6-unit course that integrates reading, writing, and study skills and that includes presentations about student services in the classroom. About 120 students per year enrolled in the new courses.

**College of Alameda** created new learning communities linking two or more academic courses with a counseling course focused on study skills and service-learning and created “Passport to Success,” an activity that requires students to visit the campus Learning Resources Center and take advantage of faculty and counselor office hours. About 50 students per year enrolled in the new learning communities.

**De Anza College** enhanced its learning communities program by giving faculty additional time for team curricular development and by assigning counselors to work directly with learning communities’ students and classrooms. Up to 1,000 students per year enrolled in the established learning communities.

**Mt. San Antonio College** created a two-year, sequential, learning community with a pre-nursing/health focus. Academic courses (math and English in the first year, science in the second year) are linked to a counseling course, and a counselor is assigned to work closely with learning community students. About 75 students per year were enrolled in the new learning community.

**Santa Ana College** enhanced its learning communities by providing faculty with training and coordinated time to develop strategies that integrate student services and classroom instruction. Faculty training also includes metacognitive techniques — helping faculty and their students think about how they think and learn. About 1,000 students per year enrolled in the established learning communities.

---

##### *Case Management Programs*

---

**Taft College** established a dedicated adviser and enhanced other support services (including expanding access to computers and a summer bridge program) for migrant students through the Center for Academic Support and Assistance (CASA) office. The adviser typically had a caseload of around 100 students.

**Victor Valley College** established a dedicated counselor for students in select developmental-level math and English courses; eventually creating a new learning community. Students are provided with intensive counseling, tutoring, and book vouchers. The counselor typically had a caseload of fewer than 200 students.

---

##### *Other Types of Programs*

---

**Merced College** created Study Central, a dedicated space on campus where students come to study, work in small groups, or receive guidance and/or tutoring from faculty and student peer mentors. Study Central also sponsors special workshops for students and faculty. About 100 students visited Study Central per week, and about 400 visited at least once each semester (with many returning regularly throughout the term).

**Pasadena City College** created summer Math Jam — a two-week, intensive, voluntary math review and college orientation — for new students assessed at all three levels of developmental math. Students then continue in Fall Life Lines, a component in which students meet with their Math Jam counselor and peer tutors in the fall semester. About 100 students participated in Math Jam each summer.

---

SOURCE: MDRC field research.

Having academic instructors and counselors work collaboratively throughout the planning and teaching of learning communities was generally more difficult than the program planners originally envisioned. MDRC's research suggested that this important collaboration was most likely to occur when a counselor-taught course was linked to an academic course. Most of the colleges promoted collaboration by compensating their faculty for the extra time required to work with their partners, sit in on each others' class, and coordinate across divisions. In fact, this was the single largest cost element of running SSPIRE at most of the colleges with learning communities.

This report provides a detailed look at a program assessment conducted by De Anza College, one of the SSPIRE colleges with the most experience in running learning communities. De Anza offered learning communities that had a range of courses; some included a student success course taught by a counselor, while others incorporated student services into two linked academic courses. The college compared the outcomes for students in its developmental-level reading and writing learning communities with those of students who took similar "stand-alone" courses. Because the characteristics and motivation levels of students in the two groups may be different, the results must be viewed with caution. Nevertheless, the college found evidence of modest increases in course pass rates and persistence for students who took developmental reading and writing learning communities. These findings were roughly comparable with those detected in other studies of learning communities by Vincent Tinto (a Syracuse University professor and leading proponent of learning communities) and MDRC.

- **One college developed a "drop-in center," where students receive academic assistance, guidance, or student service referrals from faculty, staff, and student peer guides.**

Merced College created Study Central as an informal drop-in center at the front of the student cafeteria, where students seek assistance from faculty and student peer guides in a range of academic and other areas. It was expanded to also include occasional academic workshops and more focused individual assistance in writing. The largest single cost at Merced's drop-in center was the pay to the regular classroom instructors who kept the center open about 25 hours per week. Their presence ensured that Study Central not only offered a range of supports and referrals to students, but also gave students more opportunity to interact with faculty outside of the classroom.

Merced's SSPIRE coordinators used data to support their program in several ways. For instance, the college participated in the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), and discovered that their college fell below national norms on academic advising, tutoring, and other supports to students. The college used the results to promote dialogue among faculty and staff on how they could become more responsive to students' needs. The college



also compared the academic outcomes of students who attended Study Central with those of a group of students who did not. Though it is likely that Study Central participants represented a more motivated group than the nonparticipants, college administrators were encouraged by results showing that their pass rates in developmental English and math courses and their persistence rates were higher. The findings helped build support for institutionalizing Study Central at the college.

- **Another college created a two-week, not-for-credit summer math program, with counseling and tutorial follow-up in the fall.**

Pasadena City College's summer "bridge" program, called "Math Jam," offered math review along with college orientation and additional support services for recent high school graduates in need of developmental math. In addition to math instructors, a team of tutor/mentors and a counselor provided continued academic support, student services, and personalized attention to many of the students as they moved into their first semester of college. The biggest cost of the program was the salaries for the tutor/mentors, followed closely by the administrative costs of planning and coordinating the summer program. Math Jam also paid for math textbooks for students who enrolled in the fall.

Many students had a positive experience in the two-week summer program and went on to enroll and persist at the college; however, Pasadena's own assessment suggested that the program was not producing high enough pass rates for these low-skilled students when they enrolled in math courses in the fall. In response, Pasadena added math workshops throughout the school year and began scheduling students to meet more often with the counselor and tutor/mentors in the fall semester.

- **Two colleges developed case management programs that provided targeted groups of students with personalized and structured support from counselors or advisers.**

Taft College and Victor Valley College offered direct support to their most struggling and often underserved student populations. The SSPIRE program at Taft targeted Hispanic students, especially those from migrant families. At Victor Valley, students who tested into developmental-level English and math courses were targeted for services. Program funds were used primarily to pay the faculty and staff who worked directly with SSPIRE students. Whereas regular college counselors typically have caseloads of approximately 1,000 students, the SSPIRE counselors and advisers worked with less than 200 students at any time. This enabled them to give students personalized attention and to be more proactive in scheduling meetings and conducting outreach. While these case management approaches offered important supports to the students served, they also appeared to be less conducive than other SSPIRE programs to being "scaled up" without significant increased funding.

- **All the colleges delivered services to a relatively modest number of students, who were generally more disadvantaged than an average student on the campus.**

Consistent with the goals of the initiative, the SSPIRE programs targeted their efforts toward young, low-income, and academically underprepared students. The colleges served groups of students who were more often in developmental-level courses, more likely to be from underrepresented minority groups, and younger than the average students on the campuses. The programs ranged in size, with most colleges serving no more than a few hundred students per year. Two of the colleges served around 1,000 students per year — by expanding programs that were already well established, rather than by creating wholly new programs and practices.

## **Lessons from Well-Implemented Programs**

As expected, the SSPIRE colleges confronted head-on the problem of institutional “silos,” with student services and academic functions typically housed in separate divisions, making collaboration and coordination difficult. As a result, some colleges had more success integrating services and instruction than others. Some programs were launched and operated as designed; others came together more unevenly and took longer to get off the ground. MDRC’s observations of the colleges’ experiences over the three-year grant period reveal several lessons from the programs that were implemented the most smoothly:

- **Bring instructional and student services faculty and staff together immediately and consistently: from planning and early implementation, through program operation, to program assessment and improvement.**

Not surprisingly, the most successful colleges created opportunities for faculty and staff from both instruction and student services to come together, learn from each other, better understand one another’s roles, and begin to develop solutions to problems affecting their shared students. This kind of collaboration required diligence and planning. Several SSPIRE colleges developed program coordination teams from both academic and counseling divisions; because these faculty and staff typically did not have a history of working together, it was often challenging to bring them together. But coordination teams are only the beginning: Actual collaborative activities — in professional development, direct instruction, and the delivery of services — must also be developed. Whenever possible, faculty and staff should be compensated for their time in these activities.

- **Move quickly from the broad concept of “integrating services with instruction” to clear and concrete goals and program definitions.**

SSPIRE colleges that attempted to take on too many tasks at once or set diffuse goals had difficulty developing and launching their programs. The colleges were most successful when they narrowed their program definition and scope to an easily understandable and operationally feasible level, which could then be clearly communicated to others at the college. For instance, the college that developed a drop-in center had the clear goal of providing students with a supportive environment and connecting them with faculty and staff, and made clear to others on campus that this was its purpose.

- **Secure the support of senior leadership and employ strong program leaders who can bridge the gaps between student services and academics.**

In the best cases, vice presidents and deans played three key roles across divisions and departments: (1) reinforcing clarity about the program’s vision and aims; (2) pulling together resources to augment the SSPIRE grant; and (3) helping create formal commitments to increase the likelihood that the new programs would be sustained. In addition, many of the SSPIRE colleges invested a large portion of their program funding in hiring program coordinators who were able to promote their program and recruit partners and supporters from other divisions on campus.

## **Using Data to Understand Student Progress**

The SSPIRE initiative was not just focused on integrating student services with academic instruction; it was also about encouraging colleges to analyze quantitative and qualitative data to assess and improve their programs. The colleges looked at whether their programs were implemented as designed, which students they served, and how well the programs met students’ needs — with the goal of using this evidence to inform decisions about improving the interventions. This type of assessment, which evaluators often refer to as “formative,” is well suited to new programs like SSPIRE. The colleges used a variety of data sources, including institutional data, focus groups, student surveys from the national CCSSE, and a statewide data system, California Partnership for Achieving Student Success (Cal-PASS). Several lessons emerged from this work:

- **Having instructional and student services faculty and staff review data together can spark dialogue, challenge conventional thinking, and lead to program improvements.**

The process of reviewing data can spark useful dialogue at the college, in particular when faculty and staff from both instructional and student services divisions share their interpretations of the data. For example, at one college, the coordinating team, which tracked the success rates of their program, saw that students who were encouraged to enroll in higher-level courses

often failed. As a result, students were no longer encouraged to attempt the more challenging courses; instead, program services were bolstered to provide more supports to these students.

- **Qualitative data — particularly student voices — can often be as useful as quantitative outcome data when seeking to understand students’ academic experiences and their needs for support services.**

Classroom observations, focus groups, and other tools for learning about students’ and faculty’s experiences and opinions often revealed important insights that could not be found in quantitative outcome data. In several instances, surveys and focus groups exposed differences in the ways that students and faculty viewed their classroom experiences and the availability of supports on campus. Several colleges used these findings to fuel discussions and contribute to professional development of faculty and staff in their SSPIRE programs. For instance, one college had a facilitator meet with students in their learning community classrooms, and then convey students’ feedback to the instructors to help them meet their students’ needs.

- **Several of the colleges found suggestive evidence of student success and persistence, which they attributed to their SSPIRE programs.**

Many of the SSPIRE programs compared academic outcomes for students who received SSPIRE services with outcomes for other students on their campuses who had similar characteristics. The results generally suggested that SSPIRE services led to modest improvements in persistence and course completion. However, these program results must be interpreted carefully and with regard to the characteristics of the students whom they serve. For instance, the students who chose to participate in these programs may have been more motivated or more capable of finding the supports they need than others at the college. On the other hand, students in one SSPIRE program had surprisingly low success rates. It is possible that the students targeted for SSPIRE were at particularly high risk for failure and would have fared even worse without the help of the program.

The best solution to these methodological problems is to conduct a random assignment study, in which a group of students is divided at random (much like a coin toss) into either a program group that receives a special program like SSPIRE, or a control group that does not. With a large enough sample, random assignment ensures that the demographic characteristics and motivation levels of both groups are similar at the start of the study; hence, any subsequent differences in outcomes can be attributed to the program. It was never envisioned that SSPIRE would conduct this type of evaluation, in part because most of the programs were new and were serving relatively small numbers of students. As policymakers and practitioners look for more definitive evidence on the effectiveness of program strategies to improve student success — and as the SSPIRE programs mature and serve more students — random assignment could be considered in the future.

## **What's Next for the SSPIRE Colleges?**

Funding from SSPIRE ended in early 2009, but the programs and practices it fostered continue to have a presence at each college — which was an important goal of the initiative. Some of the SSPIRE colleges' programs continue to operate with other sources of funding. At other colleges, the formal programs have ended but certain aspects of SSPIRE have been incorporated into other programs and practices on the campus. In some cases, the integration of student services and academic instruction that took place in the programs — and the collaborative relationships that developed — have led to new ways of working together across disciplines and between instructional and student services divisions. For example, several colleges created new learning communities linking a counselor-taught student success course with an academic course. With the end of SSPIRE, these learning communities are still being offered, and the counselors and academic instructors are continuing to develop new ways of providing students with the instruction and supports they need.

The ability of colleges to sustain their most promising SSPIRE practices beyond the life of the grant was strengthened when program coordinators could document their program results and when they had a comprehensive understanding of the program's cost and revenue implications. For example, several SSPIRE program coordinators used data suggesting improved student persistence rates to convince senior leaders that continuing their programs would help hold or expand the student census, often a revenue-generator for colleges.

\*\*\*\*\*

Policymakers and the general public increasingly recognize the essential role that community colleges play in providing low-income and underprepared students with the skills they need to obtain degrees and succeed in today's labor market. The colleges in the SSPIRE initiative sought to address some of the particular obstacles these students face by better integrating student services with academic instruction — a challenge for many institutions of higher education. Though the changes the SSPIRE colleges made were mostly incremental, the initiative resulted in new programs and practices on each of the campuses. By documenting their experiences, this report offers hope that the integration of student services and academic instruction is possible, if not always easy, to achieve. Most important, it offers hope that more students at these California colleges and elsewhere will receive the information, guidance, and support they need to persist in college and reach their academic goals.



## Chapter 1

# Introduction

Each year, California's 110 community colleges serve over 2.6 million students with a wide range of backgrounds, levels of academic preparation, and educational and career aspirations.<sup>1</sup> The size and diversity of the student population is a testament to a statewide commitment to the accessibility of higher education. However — following trends nationally — many students drop out before they attain the credentials necessary to reach the next step in their education or to compete successfully in today's labor market. Of California community college students seeking a degree or certificate, only about one-quarter receive their degree or certificate, or transfer to a four-year college, within six years.<sup>2</sup>

The Student Support Partnership Integrating Resources and Education (SSPIRE) initiative, funded by the James Irvine Foundation and coordinated by MDRC, aims to increase the success of young (16- to 24-year-old), low-income, and academically underprepared California community college students. To achieve this goal, SSPIRE seeks to help community colleges strengthen the academic advising, counseling, tutoring, financial aid, and other support services they offer to students and to better integrate these services with academic instruction.

From 2006 to early 2009, the SSPIRE initiative provided nine California community colleges with funding to support programs that integrate these important student services more closely with the academic instruction that students traditionally receive.<sup>3</sup> During this time, MDRC, a national, nonprofit research firm based in Oakland and New York City, managed the colleges' grants, provided the colleges with technical assistance to help them implement and improve their programs, and documented the programmatic and policy lessons that emerged from the colleges' experiences.

SSPIRE can be characterized as a pilot initiative, in which the grant to each college was meant to support a program or elements of a program that integrated academic instruction and student services in a way that was innovative on the campus but not funded or implemented at a level to generate fundamental campus-wide change. Rather, the expectation was that in the three-year grant period, the SSPIRE-funded programs and practices would serve no more than around 1,000 students per year in the largest programs, and as few as one hundred students per

---

<sup>1</sup>California Community Colleges System Office, 2008a.

<sup>2</sup>Moore and Shulock, 2007.

<sup>3</sup>The nine community colleges were: American River College, College of Alameda, De Anza College, Merced College, Mt. San Antonio College, Pasadena City College, Santa Ana College, Taft College, and Victor Valley College.

year in the smaller programs. Simultaneously, SSPIRE was expected to start dialogues on campus, identify and expand promising existing and new practices, and provide a model for future growth or adoption. This report documents the ways that the nine SSPIRE colleges achieved or failed to meet these expectations by presenting program descriptions, the colleges' own data documenting students' experiences and academic progress during and after the program, and cross-cutting lessons and conclusions drawn from MDRC's research.

## The Community College Landscape

California's community colleges are an essential part of the state's higher education and workforce development structure. Each year, the California community college system serves one-third of all 18- and 19-year olds in the state.<sup>4</sup> Eighty percent of firefighters, law enforcement officers, and emergency medical technicians are credentialed at community colleges, and 70 percent of the nurses in California received their education from community colleges.<sup>5</sup> But while the community college system offers the best opportunity for individuals to receive an affordable postsecondary education, many struggle to fully reap the benefits. A growing number of students attending community colleges face two major obstacles to success: They are academically underprepared to tackle college-level courses, and they must balance various competing priorities that can impede their academic pursuits.

It is estimated that between 70 and 85 percent of entering California community college students are assessed as needing developmental-level English and math courses, which cover foundational skills in these disciplines and are considered necessary to engage in college-level work.<sup>6</sup> Developmental-level students are limited in the courses they are able to take when they first enter college and tend to be challenged by the courses they do attempt. Moreover, students who start out by taking developmental courses will need to spend more time in community college — and spend more money on classes and books — before they can earn a certificate or a degree or transfer to a four-year institution.

Addressing the needs of these academically underprepared students is a priority throughout California and across the nation. Over the last few years, the statewide Basic Skills Initiative (BSI) has provided a framework for the California community colleges to refine and

---

<sup>4</sup>California Community Colleges System Office, 2008a.

<sup>5</sup>California Community College League, 2009.

<sup>6</sup>Fulks and Alanraig, 2008. In California, credit for developmental-level courses is applicable to overall credits earned (for financial aid eligibility and other determinations) but not for an associate's degree or for a degree from a four-year institution. As do similar institutions nationally, California community colleges offer a sequence of developmental-level courses in each discipline; courses are often described in reference to the first course in the discipline that counts toward an associate's degree or a certificate (for example, developmental courses are described as "one level below" or "two levels below" college level).



strengthen their developmental education programs. The BSI's contributions have included producing a comprehensive literature review of effective practices for developmental education ("Basic Skills as a Foundation for Success in California Community Colleges," also known as "the Poppy Copy" due to the distinctively colored cover of the printed version); requiring each college to develop a plan to strengthen its developmental education programs using elements of these practices; and securing state funding to partially support the colleges' efforts.<sup>7</sup>

Innovations in programs serving developmental-level students have traditionally been focused on instructional strategies that can be used to teach elementary skills to adult learners — techniques such as problem-based learning and manipulatives in developmental-level math courses, and critical inquiry and metacognition in developmental-level reading classes.<sup>8</sup> Such strategies are the centerpiece of many approaches to educating developmental-level students. But the Poppy Copy and other recent scholarship suggest that to be most effective, support for developmental-level learners should not be limited to the classroom or to a specific discipline.<sup>9</sup> Instead, academically underprepared students may do best when supported by the entire institution and when their developmental coursework gives them the study skills — as well as the content knowledge — they will need to succeed in their college-level classes.

Besides difficulties in the classroom, academically underprepared students tend to face other obstacles. Many struggle to balance work and family obligations — full-time employment, limited child care, or long and expensive commutes — with time spent studying and in class. Student support services, such as academic and personal advising, tutoring and labs, financial aid, and special programs, can reduce the burdens that are placed on students by their responsibilities outside the classroom, as well as provide them with direct academic support.<sup>10</sup>

Special programs, such as California's Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) or Puente, which provide coordinated services for a targeted group of at-risk students,

---

<sup>7</sup>The Basic Skills Initiative (BSI) is one of many products of a system-wide strategic planning process launched by the California Community College System Office in 2004. For more information on the Strategic Plan, see <http://strategicplan.cccco.edu>; for more information on the BSI, see <http://www.cccbsi.org>. English as a Second Language programs are also included within the scope of the BSI.

<sup>8</sup>These instructional strategies each provide pedagogical alternatives to a traditional lecture format. For more details on these techniques, see Boaler, 1998; Moyer and Jones, 2001; and Rao, 2005.

<sup>9</sup>For example, Strengthening Pre-collegiate Education in Community Colleges (SPECC), a recent action-research project focused on teaching and learning in developmental-level courses, was based largely on the theory that support for academically underprepared students should be developed in an environment in which "educators work together, informed by evidence, to strengthen these students' learning." A major element of the project was the Faculty Inquiry Groups that met at each of the 11 participating California community colleges to explore questions and practices relevant to the success of these students. The Faculty Inquiry Network was recently launched to expand this work to 16 additional California colleges. See <http://facultyinquiry.net> for details.

<sup>10</sup>Purnell and Blank, 2004.

can provide students with support and access they would not otherwise receive and lead to impressive success stories.<sup>11</sup> But services do not have to be delivered in a complete package to make a difference for a struggling student. A counselor who helps a student fill out an Education Plan, a tutor who is there for the last session before the math test, or enough financial aid to pay for that semester's books, can make the difference needed to support the student along the path to his or her educational goal. Both anecdotally and experimentally, evidence suggests that support services can be important tools for promoting more successful academic outcomes for students, particularly those who are most at risk of not achieving their goals.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the potential of student support services, there are many shortcomings in the ways that they are used and delivered on college campuses — and they often fail to reach the students who could most benefit from them. While the most capable students at community colleges can typically navigate the system and find the classes and support services they need, many others end up drifting — not getting clear guidance, not receiving extra help when they need it, and (all too often) dropping out. Many students are unaware of the services available to them; or even if they are aware of them, they don't have enough time on campus to take advantage of them.

Results from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) shed light on the challenges that community college students face and on the ways that students benefit — or fail to benefit — from the support services offered on campuses. In the 2008 national cohort of students who responded to CCSSE, over half of respondents reported working more than 20 hours a week, and over a quarter reported spending 20 or more hours caring for dependents, such as parents or children. Nearly half reported that lack of finances would be a likely or very likely cause for them to drop out of college.

While 71 percent of respondents reported that their college provides the support they need to succeed, when students were asked about specific types of support, the numbers fell: 45 percent of students stated that their college provides the financial support they need to afford their education, and only 25 percent indicated that their college helps them cope specifically with nonacademic responsibilities. And while 90 percent of students said that academic advis-

---

<sup>11</sup>For example, the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office tracks outcomes for students enrolled in Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS), which provides coordinated services (including counseling, advisement, book vouchers, and tutoring) for low-income and academically underprepared students. A 2002 report shows that when compared with other students who enrolled full time over the previous five years, EOPS students had better academic outcomes, such as persistence and degree completion.

<sup>12</sup>Purnell and Blank, 2004.

ing is important to them, 35 percent indicated that they rarely or never use it.<sup>13</sup> These results point to the importance of understanding the gaps between student needs, awareness, access, and use of services on community college campuses. CCSSE results in California, and in particular at the nine SSPIRE colleges, are consistent with these findings.<sup>14</sup>

Ideal delivery of some student support services tends to be constrained by limited resources. One oft-cited example is the high caseload of counselors and advisers: The average academic adviser or counselor has a caseload of about 1,000 students, and some colleges have a counselor-to-student ratio as high as 1:1,900.<sup>15</sup> This limits the personalized attention and guidance that community colleges can offer to students — particularly on campuses that have large numbers of disadvantaged students who need extra help.<sup>16</sup>

## **Why Integrate Student Services and Instruction?**

One way to encourage and help students to take advantage of available student support services is to connect the services explicitly to their academic experience. This may be facilitated when academic instructors and counselors alike share an understanding of the full range of problems that affect academic success and work together to connect students to the services that can help alleviate those problems. Based on this premise, a growing body of literature recommends that colleges intentionally integrate student services with academic instruction in order to increase the benefit that students receive from these services. For example, among effective practices for helping developmental-level students in California succeed, the Poppy Copy recommends creating an environment where “a comprehensive system of support services exists, and is characterized by a high degree of integration among academic and student support services.”<sup>17</sup>

Recent experimental evidence from MDRC’s Opening Doors demonstration suggests that various techniques of integrating services with instruction may indeed contribute to

---

<sup>13</sup>Over 300,000 students at 316 institutions were surveyed in the 2008 cohort. See <http://www.ccsse.org/aboutsurvey/sampling.cfm> for details about how the sample was chosen. CCSSE results reported here come from searching the data available on the CCSSE Web site (accessed December 30, 2008).

<sup>14</sup>With funding from the Irvine Foundation, all nine SSPIRE colleges administered the CCSSE in 2007 as part of the SSPIRE initiative. Some of the results of these surveys are addressed later in the report.

<sup>15</sup>Grubb, 2001; Woodlief, Thomas, and Orozco, 2003.

<sup>16</sup>Moore and Shulock, 2007.

<sup>17</sup>Center for Student Success, 2007. Other related recommended practices include: “Counseling support provided is substantial, accessible and integrated with academic courses/programs” and “Programs provide comprehensive academic support mechanisms, including the use of trained tutors.” See also Shulock, Moore, Offenstien and Kirilin, 2008; The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2008; and the Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges, 2008.

student success.<sup>18</sup> For example, MDRC evaluated a “learning communities” program at Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, NY, in which counselors and instructors jointly taught small groups of incoming developmental-level freshmen. In addition to giving the counselor a role as an instructor, the student services component of the learning communities included enhanced counseling, tutoring, and book vouchers. The study showed that students in learning communities moved more quickly through developmental English requirements, took and passed more courses, and earned more credits in their first semester than students in a control group. Two years later, learning community students were also somewhat more likely to be enrolled in college: In the third postprogram semester, 53 percent of learning communities students registered for at least one course at Kingsborough, compared with 48 percent of students in the control group.<sup>19</sup>

Another popular technique for integrating student services with instruction is the “student success course,” which focuses on helping new community college students develop skills such as time management, note-taking, and test-taking, as well as introducing them to the support services available on campus. Under Opening Doors, enrollment in a student success course, paired with visits to a campus tutoring center and improved counseling, was tested for students on probation at Chaffey College in Rancho Cucamonga, CA. The study found that participation in the program improved the average number of credits earned by 2.7 credits over the course of a year and almost doubled the proportion of students who moved off probation.<sup>20</sup>

Further evidence of the positive potential of student success courses can be found in the results of an analysis of statewide institutional data from Florida published by the Community College Research Center, which found that enrollment in a student success course increased a student’s chance of earning a credential (certificate or degree), persisting in college, or transferring to a four-year institution; this study also found that enrolling in a student success course concurrent with required developmental courses can be more helpful for academically under-prepared students than taking the developmental courses in isolation.<sup>21</sup>

While these results suggest that integrating student services with instruction holds promise for promoting student success, a variety of factors can make this goal difficult to

---

<sup>18</sup>In the Opening Doors demonstration, launched in 2003, six community colleges in four states implemented programs aimed at increasing student success through curricular and instructional innovations; enhanced student services; and/or supplementary financial aid. MDRC has been evaluating the effectiveness of the programs and found several promising results. See [http://www.mdrc.org/project\\_31\\_2.html](http://www.mdrc.org/project_31_2.html) for more details.

<sup>19</sup>Scrivener et al., 2008.

<sup>20</sup>Scrivener, Sommo, and Collado, 2009. The program was operated and evaluated in two consecutive years and substantially enhanced in the second year. The program as described and the positive results attributed to it are from the second year only. See Scrivener et al., 2008, for more details.

<sup>21</sup>Zeidenberg, Jenkins, and Calcagno, 2007.

achieve. First and foremost is the organizational structure of a typical community college, where student services are housed in one division and academic functions in another. Each division has its own administrators, staff, and budget. This structure is largely inherited from a traditional four-year college model, which assumes a more academically prepared and socially supported student body than that which exists on most California community college campuses.

Due in part to this organizational structure and in part to the expectations associated with traditional roles, student services and instruction often function as separate “silos” rather than as a unified operation — the two divisions work in parallel toward the shared goal of student success but without the dialogue necessary to coordinate their efforts.

Moreover, silos can lead to misperceptions and misunderstandings about the relationship that faculty and staff in each division have with students and with each other. Instructors (and even some administrators) can believe that the responsibilities of student services staff should be restricted to “nonacademic” problems, with very limited contributions to classroom activity. Student services staff, on the other hand, may not fully communicate what they learn about students’ needs or interests during their interactions with students — information that might inform instructors’ teaching strategies.

Silos are not inevitable, of course. In some cases, student services and instruction collaborate effectively for systemic reasons — driven by a top administrator’s commitment to breaking down silos or by an unusual management structure, such as placing counseling services in the academic affairs division, rather than in the student services division. More often, however, collaboration remains limited. Some individuals from each side create connections, but these relationships are not enough to fundamentally alter the institutional barriers to integration.

Silos are exacerbated by budgetary factors. Overall resources are limited, and often each division may feel the need to compete for those resources. California community colleges receive much lower funding per full-time enrolled student than the University of California or California State University systems,<sup>22</sup> and — along with the public education system overall — the system is expected to be under sustained budgetary pressures for the foreseeable future. Administrators and budget officers are continually faced with difficult choices. Should they hire more instructors or hire more counselors? Should they expand course offerings and sections or provide more services? Because a large portion of community college revenues are tied to classroom enrollment, instructional needs usually take precedence. Furthermore, California community colleges are required to spend at least 50 percent of their budget alloca-

---

<sup>22</sup>Including student fees and state funds, the CSUs have about 2.5 times as much funding per full-time enrolled student (FTES) as the California community colleges, and the UCs have about 5 times the funding. (Moore and Shulock, 2007). It should be noted that the differing missions of these institutions make it difficult to make direct comparisons of funding levels.

tions on direct classroom instruction — that is, on the salaries and benefits of faculty for their classroom teaching. This further restricts funding for services, because academic counselors and advisers, financial aid advisers, career counselors, and other noninstructional faculty and staff fall on the other side of the ledger (as do administration, information systems and technology, and facilities).

Finally, integrating student services with instruction may be a complex goal, simply because integration can be interpreted and implemented in variety of ways. Possible approaches include learning communities and student success courses, as discussed above, but also range from tutoring labs to student service “one-stop” centers, which include resources for academic assistance. Given such a range of possibilities, it may be difficult for a college with the goal of integration to settle on a strategy that fits its institutional capacity and needs. The SSPIRE initiative gave participating colleges a chance to think through and try out different options for integrating student services and instruction — and the result is a diverse group of programs, as can be seen in the following section.

## **The SSPIRE Colleges and Programs**

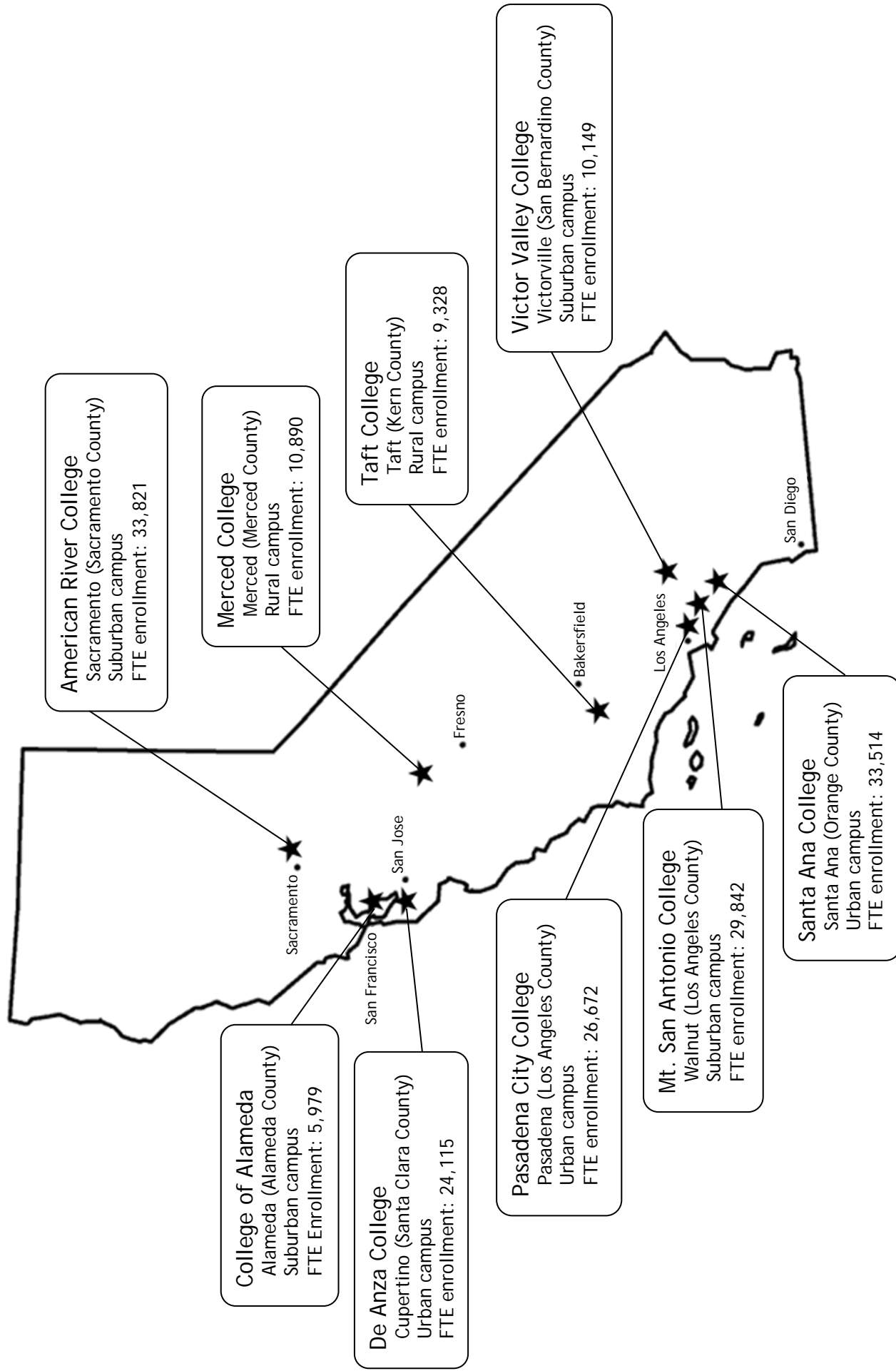
The SSPIRE initiative was developed on the premise that integrating student services with academic instruction gives at-risk students better and more frequent access to resources that will help improve their college experiences and lead to better outcomes. A secondary aim of the initiative was to encourage colleges to use data to monitor the effects of their approaches to integration and modify those approaches if necessary. To invite colleges to explore the approach promoted by SSPIRE, MDRC issued a Request for Proposals in 2005. Twenty-eight California community colleges applied, and nine were selected to participate in the initiative, based primarily on the strength of their program ideas, but also on a desire to represent both urban and rural communities across the state. The colleges are geographically diverse and are in many ways typical of the range of community colleges and students across California. Figure 1.1 shows the locations and enrollment of each of the nine selected colleges.

Based on its unique institutional capacity and the needs of its student body, each SSPIRE college developed ways to better integrate academic instruction and student services. To support these efforts, each college received the following:

- A three-year grant of up to \$250,000 to design and implement strategies to integrate student services with instruction;
- Technical assistance to help the college implement its program, conduct formative, data-based assessments and make needed improvements; and

Figure 1.1

The SSPIRE Colleges: Location and Enrollment



- Participation in annual meetings of the SSPIRE colleges and other activities that allowed SSPIRE colleges to build relationships and learn from each other's efforts.

In response to the broad goal of integrating student services with instruction, the nine colleges implemented a range of approaches under SSPIRE, with several overlapping components and strategies (see Table 1.1). The SSPIRE grants at each college were supplemented by a combination of institutional funds, in-kind contributions, and coordination with other grants. The majority of the colleges used their SSPIRE funding to develop new programs or approaches, though several chose to expand or enhance existing programs. Most of the colleges implemented programs with direct costs of roughly \$100,000 per year. The programs varied in terms of scale, with most serving no more than a few hundred students per year on campuses with between 5,000 and 35,000 students. The largest SSPIRE programs — which were enhancements of existing programs — served up to around 1,000 students per year.

The most popular approach was to focus on learning communities: a cohort of students who take two or more courses that are linked together with shared curriculum and course content. Five of the nine SSPIRE colleges developed new learning communities or enhanced an existing program, focusing on increased collaboration between counselors and academic instructors. These colleges took two general approaches to integrating student services into learning community classrooms. The first was modifying curriculum to include student services in academic learning community courses, as well as assigning dedicated hours for counselors to work with students in these courses. The second was linking a counselor-taught student success course with an academic course.

Taking the first approach, American River College has linked developmental reading and writing in a single course (much like a learning community) and included a study skills component in the revised curriculum; counselors make periodic visits to these classrooms. De Anza College has modified the curriculum of learning communities to include student services and assigns counselors to make periodic visits to learning community classes to promote awareness of various student services available on campus and to encourage students to use them. De Anza also implemented the second approach, by creating a new learning community in which a student success course is linked with developmental English and math courses. Also taking the second approach, Mt. San Antonio College hired a dedicated counselor to teach a student success course and to work with students enrolled in a two-year, sequential learning community with a pre-nursing/health focus. Santa Ana College and the College of Alameda have built a number of learning communities that link student success courses with developmental English or math courses.



## Student Support Partnership Integrating Resources and Education

Table 1.1

### SSPIRE College Program Approaches

---

#### *Learning Community Programs*

---

**American River College** restructured developmental-level reading and writing courses into a single, team-taught, 6-unit course that integrates reading, writing, and study skills and that includes presentations about student services in the classroom. About 120 students per year enrolled in the new courses.

**College of Alameda** created new learning communities linking two or more academic courses with a counseling course focused on study skills and service-learning and created “Passport to Success,” an activity that requires students to visit the campus Learning Resources Center and take advantage of faculty and counselor office hours. About 50 students per year enrolled in the new learning communities.

**De Anza College** enhanced its learning communities program by giving faculty additional time for team curricular development and by assigning counselors to work directly with learning communities’ students and classrooms. Up to 1,000 students per year enrolled in the established learning communities.

**Mt. San Antonio College** created a two-year, sequential, learning community with a pre-nursing/health focus. Academic courses (math and English in the first year, science in the second year) are linked to a counseling course, and a counselor is assigned to work closely with learning community students. About 75 students per year were enrolled in the new learning community.

**Santa Ana College** enhanced its learning communities by providing faculty with training and coordinated time to develop strategies that integrate student services and classroom instruction. Faculty training also includes metacognitive techniques — helping faculty and their students think about how they think and learn. About 1,000 students per year enrolled in the established learning communities.

---

#### *Case Management Programs*

---

**Taft College** established a dedicated adviser and enhanced other support services (including expanding access to computers and a summer bridge program) for migrant students through the Center for Academic Support and Assistance (CASA) office. The adviser typically had a caseload of around 100 students.

**Victor Valley College** established a dedicated counselor for students in select developmental-level math and English courses; eventually creating a new learning community. Students are provided with intensive counseling, tutoring, and book vouchers. The counselor typically had a caseload of fewer than 200 students.

---

#### *Other Types of Programs*

---

**Merced College** created Study Central, a dedicated space on campus where students come to study, work in small groups, or receive guidance and/or tutoring from faculty and student peer mentors. Study Central also sponsors special workshops for students and faculty. About 100 students visited Study Central per week, and about 400 visited at least once each semester (with many returning regularly throughout the term).

**Pasadena City College** created summer Math Jam — a two-week, intensive, voluntary math review and college orientation — for new students assessed at all three levels of developmental math. Students then continue in Fall Life Lines, a component in which students meet with their Math Jam counselor and peer tutors in the fall semester. About 100 students participated in Math Jam each summer.

---

SOURCE: MDRC field research.

The other four SSPIRE colleges each took a distinctive approach to integrating student services and academic instruction. Merced College created a drop-in study center where any student at the college can receive academic assistance and other help from faculty and trained peer mentors. Pasadena City College created a two-week, not-for-credit summer program offering intensive math review and college orientation for new students in need of developmental math prep. Counselors and peer tutors continue to offer these students support in the fall semester. Finally, Taft and Victor Valley Colleges each created case management-style programs, in which a targeted group of students receives personal and structured support from dedicated counselors or advisers, as well as various instructional and support services, such as tutoring or book vouchers; both programs also include elements of learning communities. Taft's case management program, in keeping with its setting in an agricultural community, targets Hispanic students, often from migrant families; Victor Valley targets students in developmental-level math and English courses.

While serving students during the grant period was the central activity for program coordinators, faculty, student services staff, and administrators at each of the nine SSPIRE colleges, these individuals also devoted time and effort to other related activities. These included examining the program's efforts to consider whether it appeared to be well suited for disadvantaged students on the campus and working with others on campus to share ideas and build partnerships and practices that might last beyond SSPIRE.

## **Support for the SSPIRE Programs**

Since the early stages of SSPIRE, the continual growth and development of the colleges' SSPIRE programs were influenced by several factors. These include technical assistance from MDRC and the promotion of cross-college learning, as well as the colleges' data on the programs.

MDRC's technical assistance has consisted of frequent communication with and regular visits to the colleges to give advice on the design of the programs and to provide ongoing feedback. MDRC worked with the coordinating teams at each college to support implementation of the strategies stated in the colleges' proposals and, in some cases, offered suggestions for ways to enhance or modify these strategies. Cross-college learning was facilitated by annual gatherings, occasional phone conferences, smaller cluster meetings between college teams who were coordinating similar programs, and visits by some teams to other colleges to see their programs in action.

The technical assistance also served to facilitate work with CCSSE and with the California Partnership for Achieving Student Success (Cal-PASS), a student data system used by many K-16 institutions across California. In addition, SSPIRE colleges used internal informa-

tion and feedback to modify their programs. Drawing on the colleges' experiences in this area, this report contains illustrations of how colleges can use data to inform programmatic decisions.

## Evaluation in SSPIRE

One of the goals of SSPIRE was to encourage colleges to use both quantitative and qualitative data to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the program in operation and learn how the program could be improved to best serve students. Formative evaluation of this type is intended to provide preliminary information about the program's implementation, including whether it was implemented as designed, which students it affected, and the appropriateness of its design for meeting students' needs. It is the most appropriate type of evaluation for an initiative designed to support exploratory programs and program elements, because it creates the opportunity for evidence-based decision-making and programmatic modification.

The SSPIRE colleges looked at institutional data, gathered new data, and worked with Cal-PASS and CCSSE to better understand students who were involved in the program and the student body overall. In addition to these formal means of feedback and evaluation, the colleges paid close attention to the responses and experiences of students who participated in the programs and made adjustments to better serve them.

Several of the colleges used Cal-PASS data to develop a sense of emerging trends in achievement among program participants, relative to nonparticipants in similar courses. These comparisons do not serve as a rigorous assessment of the effectiveness of the program, because the comparison groups created by the colleges do not control for the background characteristics of members of both groups, including motivation levels, and the difference in outcomes between the two groups are not tested for statistical significance.<sup>23</sup> Instead, these trends — often coupled with qualitative or quantitative data gathered internally — serve as feedback about whether the program was operating as designed. Examples of how the SSPIRE colleges used data in this way appear throughout the report, with a particular focus on the uses of data at De Anza, Merced, and Pasadena.

---

<sup>23</sup>A rigorous way of creating comparison groups would involve random assignment of students into either the program or into regular courses. Due to the early stage of program implementation and the small number of students served, random assignment would not have been an appropriate evaluation method for these programs. Moreover, the SSPIRE initiative had broader goals than increasing outcomes for targeted students, such as promoting dialogue about these students between faculty, staff, and administrators throughout the campus.

## **Moving Beyond SSPIRE**

As the end of the three-year SSPIRE grant came closer, the conversations that the colleges were having internally and with MDRC focused increasingly on questions of sustainability: Would the program continue in the same form? If so, how would it be funded? If obtaining funding proved to be difficult, which elements or features of the program should the program coordinator and staff work to maintain? How could these elements be incorporated into, or influence, existing programs and practices on campus? Each of these questions often required a complex answer, depending on the elements of the program, the budget and funding streams of the college, and the priorities of the administration. This report details the strategies each SSPIRE college has developed to maintain the program or related practices on its campus.

This report also briefly explores ways in which the program practices and priorities that were introduced or expanded as part of the SSPIRE initiative appear to inform other programs and practices on campus. As the director of a similar initiative characterizes it, “Perhaps another way to think about sustainability is not that the program visibly continues, but that the program principles intentionally and invisibly become part of the campus culture.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, this report looks not only at how the SSPIRE colleges have integrated student services and academic instruction in their SSPIRE programs, but also at some cases where they have used the program to foster dialogues and attempt to develop a deeper understanding of how services and instruction can be better integrated across the campus to promote student success.

## **Sources of the Data in This Report**

To gather information about the SSPIRE programs, MDRC conducted two rounds of structured field research that included interviews with faculty, staff, students, and administrators, as well as observations of the programs in action. The first round of field research took place in 2007 and included all nine colleges. The second round, covering a subset of the colleges, took place in spring 2008. In addition, MDRC’s roles as a technical assistance provider and as the grant manager created a knowledge base that was built through ongoing interactions with SSPIRE program staff and the information provided in the colleges’ biannual reports to MDRC. Data on the costs of the programs are based on the colleges’ program budgets, as reported to MDRC in the role of grant manager.

CCSSE and the Community College Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (CCFSSE) were administered at all nine colleges in spring 2007. Student demographic data come from Cal-PASS. Student outcome data, in particular for De Anza, Merced, and Pasadena, primarily come from Cal-PASS, as well as from internal college research. Readers should

---

<sup>24</sup>Asera, 2008. p. 21.

be aware that unlike most MDRC evaluations, SSPIRE did not involve random assignment of students to program and control groups to measure the effect, or “value added,” of SSPIRE over existing programs and services. Given the fact that many of the SSPIRE programs were in the early stages of development — and were often small scale — such a rigorous research design would not have been appropriate. The student outcomes presented in this report are intended to illustrate how the colleges themselves are gathering and using data to determine whether their programs are headed in the right direction and to identify where further improvements may be warranted.

More detailed information about data sources can be found in the appendix.

## **Report Overview**

The next four chapters of this report provide details about each college’s SSPIRE program and the colleges’ assessments of their programs. Chapter 2 focuses on the five colleges that implemented learning communities; Chapter 3 describes Merced’s drop-in center; Chapter 4 describes Pasadena’s summer math program; and Chapter 5 discusses the case management approaches of Taft and Victory Valley. Each chapter presents data on the costs of some of the key program components for select programs and explores factors that appear central to the creation and maintenance of these programs. These four chapters discuss the colleges’ plans for sustaining their individual programs — or for sustaining the most promising practices or approaches that emerge from these programs — beyond the SSPIRE initiative. In addition, Chapters 2, 3, and 4 look closely at De Anza, Merced, and Pasadena’s use of data and findings on student outcomes. The final chapter presents cross-cutting lessons and conclusions based on MDRC’s research and experiences working with the colleges throughout the initiative.



## Chapter 2

# Infusing Student Services into Learning Communities at Five SSPIRE Colleges

As community colleges continue to explore new ways to refine the developmental education curriculum and get more students to access academic support services, the “learning community” model has emerged as one of the more popular approaches. Typical learning communities enroll between 15 and 30 students in two or three linked courses that last at least one semester, though some models move students from semester to semester as a cohort. These linked courses aim to focus on broad interdisciplinary themes that span different academic content areas. Learning communities are intended to foster active, cooperative learning experiences and to develop stronger relationships among students, faculty, and staff both in and outside the classroom. Some learning communities schedule class time to increase students’ familiarity with academic support services and social events in order to better connect them with the larger campus community.<sup>1</sup>

A **learning community** is two or more classes that are linked by shared curriculum and content, taken together by a group of students. SSPIRE learning communities bring student services into this curricular model in innovative ways.

Learning communities also provide an opportunity to reshape the traditionally disconnected responsibilities of academic instructors and student service representatives. While these two divisions have been historically viewed as two separate campus entities, learning community classrooms can act as the “laboratories” in which both divisions can come together to share their efforts to enhance student learning and academic success.<sup>2</sup> But just how can academic instructors and student services faculty and staff work together as partners within learning communities? Five of the nine colleges involved in the SSPIRE initiative — American River College, College of Alameda, De Anza College, Mt. San Antonio College, and Santa Ana College — chose to use their SSPIRE grants to develop more efficient ways for students to access campus support services in the classroom.

---

<sup>1</sup>For a more comprehensive description of learning communities, refer to Chapter 2 of Visher, Wathington, Richburg-Hayes, and Schneider, 2008.

<sup>2</sup>Smith and Williams, 2007.

## Overview of the SSPIRE Learning Communities

### Approaches to Integration Taken by the Five Colleges

As illustrated throughout the rest of this chapter, the five SSPIRE colleges that chose learning communities as the structure to better integrate academic instruction with student services did so in various ways and for various reasons and experienced different levels of accomplishments and challenges to integration. A common theme, however, is that these five colleges have designed learning community courses to help students pass developmental education courses. Developmental education courses and programs are typically designed to enhance students' skills in reading, writing, and basic math. Developmental education can also include academic support activities designed to help unprepared students transition into college-level course work.

Two general models for integrating student services into learning community classrooms have been adopted in these five SSPIRE colleges: one was to modify curriculum to include student services in academic learning community courses, as well as assigning dedicated hours for counselors to work with students in these courses; the other was to link a "student success" course taught by a counselor with one or more academic courses.

### Model 1: Support Services Are Provided by Counselors, Instructors, and Others in Academic Classes in Learning Communities

Two SSPIRE colleges assigned counselors to learning community courses to make presentations or lead activities that were relevant to the course content being covered. In addition, academic instructors incorporate student services into classroom activities and introduce and encourage students to use support services available to them on campus. Outside of class, counselors work with students one on one to address individual concerns or challenges, to refer them to appropriate support services on campus, to help them address financial problems that may affect their academic performance and attendance in class, or to advise them on future course planning.

The Learning-in-Communities (LinC) program at **De Anza College** has existed for over 10 years, offering between 25 and 30 different learning communities for 750-1,000 students per year. De Anza offers both developmental-level and college-level learning communities, linking courses such as reading and writing; sociology and psychology; or math, counseling, and writing. As part of SSPIRE, De Anza learning community coordinators assign one counselor who dedicates 10 drop-in counseling hours a week to working specifically with any student enrolled in a learning community on his or her individual progress. That counselor also makes periodic classroom presentations that address curriculum topics or issues of test anxiety, future course planning, and career exploration. The counselor serves about 300 students per



quarter. A second counselor dedicates hours to working specifically with De Anza's new sequential math and English learning community (described below as part of the second model). De Anza also provides learning community academic instructors with professional development days for designing curricula that integrate into course syllabi activities presented by counselors or by other student services staff. As part of SSPIRE, De Anza also added a new developmental reading and writing learning community two levels below college level.

**American River College** used its SSPIRE grant to address students' basic literacy needs by offering learning community-style courses for those students placed at either two levels below or one level below transfer-level reading and writing proficiency (excluding English as a Second Language students). The college offers four to eight learning communities per semester, with about 20 students per course. As part of SSPIRE, English faculty members created a curriculum integrating lessons from separate, three- and four-unit developmental reading and writing courses two levels below transfer — as well as study skills — into a single six-unit course, team-taught by a reading instructor and a writing instructor. The college also offers a reading course linked with a writing course for students placed one level below transfer level. Two counselors set up individual counseling assessments for students whom the instructors identify as most at risk of failing or most in need of support services. These counselors also make periodic classroom presentations about campus academic support services (for example, math tutoring services, veteran student services, or supplemental financial assistance) during class time.

### **Model 2: Linking a Counselor-Taught Student Success Course with an Academic Course in a Learning Community**

A growing number of learning communities serving underprepared students offer a counseling course — sometimes referred to as a guidance or student success course — which is linked to academic courses in a learning community. These courses are typically taught by counselors and are designed to teach students to develop effective study techniques, time management skills, and other valuable academic behaviors. Moreover, the courses may provide students with time to reflect on how well they are doing in other academic courses and can also facilitate peer tutoring or mentoring, study groups, and educational planning.

As part of its SSPIRE initiative, the **College of Alameda** created a new Transformative Learning Connections learning communities program to help developmental-level students move through their first year of college. The program serves about 25 students per semester, who take a counseling course along with a developmental math and/or developmental English course. They also can take one or two other academic courses such as biology while they are in the program. In addition to providing students with information about academic skill-building, the counseling instructor requires them to spend time at the campus math and English tutoring labs every week to work on their assignments (an activity called "Passport to Success"),

incorporates service-learning activities that are related to their academic coursework, and helps students with educational and career planning. The counseling and academic instructors meet regularly to confer about their mutual students' progress and performance.

**Mt. San Antonio College** (Mt. SAC) utilized its SSPIRE grant to develop a pre-nursing/health learning community. A cohort of students move together through a two-year sequence, with developmental English and math courses in their first year and science courses in their second year. The cohort also takes a counseling course every semester they are in the program, which covers topics such as study skills, stress management, test-taking tips, and career-seeking strategies. The program enrolls an average of 50 students for the first year of the sequence (who either take the English or math class — or both — with the counseling course), and about half of those students continue on for the science sequence the following year. Counselors also arrange for outside guests who speak about nursing programs and lead student field trips to hospitals or other health facilities. In addition, Mt. SAC's learning community counselors and academic instructors work together to closely monitor the academic progress of the learning community students from semester to semester.

Like De Anza, **Santa Ana College's** learning communities program is over a decade old, so SSPIRE is a new addition to a well-established program. The college enrolls over 400 students per semester in up to 20 Freshman Year Experience (FYE) learning communities and 5 to 10 second-year learning communities (LCII). All learning communities with developmental English or math courses incorporate counseling courses to support students' transition into college-level courses.<sup>3</sup> Santa Ana's learning communities are generally scheduled as a year-long sequence designed to keep students with their cohort for the full year. As a way to increase knowledge of campus services among learning community faculty, SSPIRE funding was used for faculty development to connect academic lessons and assignments to student services topics in the counseling course. Moreover, learning community classrooms incorporate metacognitive activities — higher-order learning activities that help learners become more aware of how they comprehend information. The activities are piloted by learning community teaching teams, with counselors and academic instructors trying out different activities on one another as part of their professional development and incorporating the activities into their courses as interdisciplinary assignments.

In addition to **De Anza's** dedicated counselor approach, described earlier as one implementation of model no. 1, the college now offers a year-long counseling course that is linked to its new sequential math and English learning community. The learning community progression moves a cohort of students from developmental math and developmental reading (and lab)

---

<sup>3</sup>Some LCII learning communities, which can include either developmental or college-level courses, also link other courses, such as chemistry, speech, or psychology, to the counseling course.

in the first quarter, through developmental math and writing lab in the second quarter, and finally through college-level math and English in the final quarter. A counseling instructor teaches the counseling course with the same cohort throughout the year, addressing the academic and personal needs that can be obstacles to students' success in school.

## **Characteristics of Students in the Five Learning Community Programs**

### **How Students are Recruited and Selected**

Each SSPIRE learning community program takes a slightly different approach to identifying and recruiting students, though one similarity is that students freely choose to enroll in the courses. Because Santa Ana's and De Anza's learning community programs are well known and include courses from various departments on campus, their recruitment strategies are far-reaching and involve several faculty and campus personnel. For example, Santa Ana's learning community counselors staff a learning communities "tent" in the campus quad (where there is heavy student traffic throughout the day) to promote the program to continuing developmental-level students, while the college's outreach team visits local high schools to recruit, test, and assess incoming developmental-level students who are interested in joining a first-year learning community.

The three newer SSPIRE learning communities — Alameda, American River, and Mt. SAC — rely on a smaller group of program personnel to promote their programs. For instance, Alameda's lone learning community counseling instructor spearheaded the initial recruitment efforts mainly by encouraging the students she would see in regular counseling and placement sessions to enroll in the program. At Mt. SAC, the program coordinator — also one of the two counseling instructors — contacts students who express an interest in pursuing a nursing or health career when they begin college and who have placed into developmental English and/or math. Former students also refer friends and classmates into these three smaller-scale SSPIRE learning communities programs.

### **Demographic Characteristics of Learning Communities Students**

Certain demographic characteristics for the combined 2006-2007 and 2007-2008 academic years are consistent across the colleges (See Table 2.1). For example, in four of the five colleges, more women enrolled in learning community courses than men. In addition, four of the five colleges have higher percentages of African-American students in learning communities than the overall percentages of African-Americans at these colleges, and three of five colleges enrolled a higher percentage of Hispanic students relative to their overall percentage of

Student Support Partnership Integrating Resources and Education

Table 2.1

Demographic Characteristics of Learning Community Students,  
Compared with All Students at Five SSPIRE Colleges  
(Academic Years 2006-2007 and 2007-2008)

Characteristic	American River College		College of Alameda		De Anza College		Mt. San Antonio College		Santa Ana College	
	Learning Communities Students	All Students	Learning Communities Students	All Students	Learning Communities Students	All Students	Learning Communities Students	All Students	Learning Communities Students	All Students
Gender <sup>a</sup> (%)										
Female	54.9	49.4	61.0	57.9	47.8	51.7	76.9	54.9	55.4	38.5
Male	45.1	50.6	39.0	42.1	52.2	48.4	23.1	45.1	44.6	61.5
Race/ethnicity (%)										
African-American	36.5	9.2	52.0	25.0	6.3	5.9	5.1	4.9	2.1	3.4
Asian	9.4	8.9	18.2	31.9	49.4	37.4	7.1	20.6	7.7	11.0
Hispanic	13.7	13.9	16.9	12.7	14.1	16.2	65.4	39.3	77.4	38.4
White	31.1	49.1	3.9	16.3	15.1	24.3	8.3	15.6	6.7	36.6
Other <sup>b</sup>	9.4	18.9	9.1	14.2	15.1	16.3	14.1	19.7	6.2	10.8
Age <sup>c</sup> (%)										
19 years old or under	45.5	22.2	62.3	30.1	62.2	42.6	84.0	50.1	69.4	21.0
20 - 24 years old	25.6	23.1	24.7	24.2	24.7	20.5	10.3	16.8	20.8	17.7
25 years old and over	28.9	54.7	13.0	45.7	13.1	36.8	5.8	33.1	9.9	61.3
Total students <sup>d</sup>	277	87,232	77	17,535	1,302	63,817	156	105,533	2,005	81,416

SOURCE: Cal-PASS.

NOTES: <sup>a</sup>Excludes "unknown" for gender.

<sup>b</sup>Other includes Filipino, Pacific Islander Native American, Other, and Uncollected.

<sup>c</sup>Some age columns may not add to 100% because of missing data.

<sup>d</sup>Total students reflects the headcount, not FTES (full-time equivalent student) count.

Hispanic students. Finally, the majority of students enrolled in learning communities across four of the colleges are 19 years old or younger, and in all five colleges, students in learning communities are younger on average than the overall population.

These demographic patterns are generally consistent with the patterns expected for the particular student groups that the programs at these five colleges aim to serve. For instance, since African-American and Hispanic students are generally overrepresented in developmental-level courses in California community colleges, it makes sense that in learning community programs with developmental-level courses, these groups would have higher enrollment percentages than other groups. Moreover, many learning community programs are geared to help students make the transition from high school academics to college academics, so many programs recruit and enroll first-year students, the majority of whom are right out of high school and thus are typically 19 or younger.

## **The SSPIRE Learning Communities in Operation**

### **Advantages of Integrating Student Services in a Learning Community**

As discussed in this section, the experiences of the five colleges suggest that learning communities with integrated student services may have three key advantages over traditional academic learning communities: facilitating collaboration between academic instructors and counselors, helping students take advantage of support services, and helping students grasp academic material.

#### **Academic Instructors and Counselors Collaborating to Address Students' Needs**

One of the key benefits of academic instructors and counselors working together in the SSPIRE learning communities is that time is built in for these two groups to review students' progress, identify students' needs, and align their course assignments. Instructors feel that these meetings help them gain a better understanding of the role counselors play in supporting students' efforts to address their academic and personal challenges. As one Santa Ana academic instructor noted, "The things that some students deal with outside of class are so intense that it is remarkable that they continue to stay until the end of the semester...and I would not otherwise know what they go through if not for my [counselor] partner, who updates me about why they may be struggling so much or why they disappear from my class." Reciprocally, learning community counselors acknowledge that they have a better appreciation for the demands instructors face in helping students master academic content while teaching multiple classes and staying involved in various department committees or task forces.

Some of the SSPIRE colleges that adopted the linked counseling course model bring together the academic and counseling instructors to consult with one another on grading or offering additional support for their students. At Alameda, academic and counseling instructor teams meet together at least once a semester to review each student's attendance, classroom behavior, and progress in understanding content. The reviews aim to ensure that each student is given a fair evaluation across all of his or her learning community courses. Similarly, Mt. SAC learning community counselors work with academic instructors after an exam is given to discuss which students need more attention or customized tutoring when they are in danger of failing or dropping one or more of the courses in the learning community.

When colleges were able to link a counselor-taught student success course to an academic course with well-coordinated syllabi and joint assignments, this appeared to both create a strong sense of service integration in the classroom and foster an important bond between the counseling and academic faculty. Across the colleges, this model of integrating student services into learning communities seemed more likely to encourage collaboration than the other model, in which academic curricula were revised and student services representatives were present in the classroom. This second approach often raised more implementation issues, as faculty and staff found it difficult to align schedules and goals among instructors, counselors, and other student services staff.

### Helping Students Get Access to Campus Support Services

Generally, students note that an important benefit of being in a learning community is finding out about useful campus services without having to spend too much out-of-class time trying to find these services or having to be responsible for tasks such as filling out financial aid forms, getting book loans, or creating educational plans on their own. Illustrating how the linked programs help students learn about services, a De Anza instructor sends learning community students on a scavenger hunt for student services and then has them present to the class what they learned. A similar activity occurs at Santa Ana, as the counseling and English instructors sometimes require students to do research and make presentations in class about services offered in the math study center, the writing center, or the tutoring center.

Santa Ana also developed a Financial Aid Completion Initiative component in its learning community classrooms. The Initiative targets students who had begun filling out the college's Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) but never finished, helping students complete these forms in the linked counseling classes or on occasion in linked math classes. This college also has targeted AB540 students (enrolled immigrant students who have attended California high schools for three years or more) to learn about and better understand their financial aid options, such as being eligible to receive a \$100 book voucher for their classes.

## Helping Students Grasp Academic Material

Integration of student services in learning communities also allows counselors to play a role in helping students with their classroom learning. Many learning community students from all five colleges mention liking the idea of counselors being the conduit between them and academic instructors, so that the counselors could advocate for them when they found it difficult to grasp the material being covered in the linked academic class. Such is the case in Santa Ana and Mt. SAC, where counseling instructors regularly sit in on the linked academic class to observe and act as a “model learner” for students by participating in class discussions. Similarly, the academic instructor comes into the counseling course to assist students with homework or to work side by side with a counselor (who normally leads the class) on a presentation or lecture.

In at least one instance, counselors had to fine-tune their presentations to make sure that counselors were promoting academic learning. Several students at one college said that the counseling presentations in their academic classes were not always relevant to what they would be reading about, stating that sometimes the presentations focused too much on real-world statistics or news stories about the topic and “Got in the way of us understanding the novel.” Heeding this kind of student feedback, counselors work with the academic faculty partners to better identify and design lessons that relate to students’ specific concerns.

While academic instructors are well versed in their area of study, learning communities with a student services component also aim to make academic knowledge more relevant to students’ lives and thus help them better retain that knowledge. During the counseling class at Mt. SAC, for instance, students are given an opportunity to further process the content learned in their linked academic courses, explore health-related career options, and take class field trips to several universities and hospitals to watch professionals perform their duties on the job — all of which offer students new insights into how the scientific knowledge they hear about in the classroom is applied in the field. The counseling course linked to an English course at Alameda also offers students a chance to bring the realities of the local outside world into the classroom. The counseling instructor developed a service-learning component of the course, where students participate in service-learning projects with the Alameda Point Collaborative, an agency that serves needy families. Students must complete two hours a week of service (for example, working in soup kitchens or tutoring) four times a semester. Students use their service-learning experiences as a basis for writing assignments given in both the counseling and English courses.

## Challenges of Integrating Student Services into Learning Communities

Learning community program representatives from all five colleges recognize that for a variety of reasons, academic instructors and student services staff do not always work well together on their campuses. Whether the colleges tried to integrate student services into new or well-established linked courses, common problems, such as not having enough counselors

available for learning community courses, having unequal representation or delegation of tasks between counselors and instructors, or difficulties maintaining regular meetings, have hampered efforts to fully integrate counseling or other student services components into learning communities. The following section focuses on these challenges and how institutions responded to them.

### Difficulty in Recruiting Counselors to Work in Learning Communities

Some of the colleges reported difficulties recruiting enough counselors to participate in their learning community programs or getting enough of counselors' time when they did participate. For instance, De Anza program coordinators found it hard to initially get counselors into the program because many already felt overstretched by their regular counseling duties. The coordinators also faced initial resistance from the counseling department to lend them quality counselors and commit some of their time to working solely with learning community students. This problem, however, was addressed over time as the coordinator enlisted the Vice President of Instruction to facilitate discussions with the Dean of Counseling to help convey the value of bringing counselors into learning community classrooms, while the coordinators (and faculty) came to recognize how institutional demands placed on counselors require them to remain available to the larger campus community. These competing obligations led to counselors initially contributing less frequently to the program than the program coordinators had hoped.

Faculty and staff at Mt. SAC also reported that recruiting counselors to teach the linked counseling course proved challenging. Some counselors felt that their time could be better spent helping students in one-on-one counseling rather than teaching a student success course. Other counselors who were interested in teaching the course could not commit the time required to teach or participate in the learning community. When full-time counselors were not available to teach in the learning community, Mt. SAC coordinators recruited part-time counselors who were often enthusiastic but had limited availability on campus and more limited knowledge of student services than their full-time counterparts. As a result, the coordinators have explored the possibility of offering learning community students dedicated drop-in counseling hours rather than linked counseling courses.

When the new linked curriculum was created at American River, instructors and counselors (and other student services staff) planned periodic classroom presentations for learning community courses during the first year of the grant, but during this first year a lack of follow-up contact resulted in counselors either canceling or forgetting to make these presentations. Subsequently, faculty made adjustments after these first-year struggles by asking counselors well ahead of time to confirm the best dates to make presentations (for example, at least three weeks beforehand), and then calling or sending e-mails to the counselors to remind them of their presentation. As a result of these efforts, some strides were made over the following two years to



get more counselors committed to presenting study skills and college knowledge in the linked reading/writing courses — an improvement that the program coordinators hope will be sustained.

### Lack of Clarity in Counselor and Instructor Team Roles and Responsibilities

Although learning community counselors and academic instructors generally like the concept of working together, they sometimes differ on what roles each should play to best support their students and help them succeed. The differences at times lead to unequal divisions of labor or clashes in working styles. A lack of clarity in defining roles and responsibilities led to counselors and student services staff charging that the academic instructors regarded themselves as having a higher status or being more entitled to privileges than counselors.

Alameda is one college where these kinds of conflicts emerged. Student services staff and academic instructors were not accustomed to working together. This initially led to misconceptions on the part of academic instructors that they should primarily take on the responsibilities of curriculum and classroom coordination while the counselors should simply recruit students for the program. This misconception proved slow to change. Similarly, American River's SSPIRE coordinators often experienced miscommunication, as it was not made clear whether the instructor or the counselor was to schedule the days for counselors to make presentations or which topics counselors could or should cover in the presentations. As a result, very few student service presentations were given at the outset of the new reading/writing course.

### Program Coordination Time Competes with Standard Instructor Responsibilities

Some program coordinators, especially those involved with developing the newer learning community programs, found it difficult to balance their regular instruction schedule with program coordination responsibilities that lie outside their traditional sphere of work, such as grant writing, budget management, and program recruitment. A SSPIRE coordinator, who also serves as a learning community counseling instructor, noted feeling overwhelmed by the added responsibilities of program management, saying that, "...the budgeting and scheduling takes up a lot of my time. Ultimately, it's the students that suffer because when the students need to see me [for counseling], I'm not available." A former learning community program coordinator at another college shared a similar sentiment:

Our roles as faculty coordinator were never adequately defined. I thought I'd be meeting with the coordinating team and still be able to work a lot with my students, but somehow it became the thing that we're always busy writing reports or figuring out the budget. When it comes to the program's administrative tasks, it's really a feeling that no one is minding the store except faculty coordinators and it was never made clear to us that that would be [our] job. We're trained to teach.

Some coordinators found that the biggest hurdle is addressing the various program coordination tasks, learning how to encourage other counselors and academic instructors to work more collaboratively, and still being able to be an effective instructor who is accessible to his or her students.

### **What It Takes to Integrate Student Services into Learning Communities**

Learning communities tend to require more resources and support than traditional community colleges courses, especially when learning communities attempt to integrate student services into the classroom. This section first focuses on two of the SSPIRE learning community programs — at Santa Ana and at Alameda — to illustrate the kinds of overall expenditures needed to support a well-established program (such as at Santa Ana) and a newly formed program (such as at Alameda) that integrates support services into the linked courses. The section next discusses the cost of instructor compensation — for example, what roles and responsibilities instructors take on as part of their college’s learning community program, how they are compensated for their extra effort, and what professional development activities have been designed to support instructors and counselors involved in the learning communities.

#### **Overall Costs of Learning Communities**

The cost of running learning communities with a student services component can vary greatly, depending on the elements of the program design and the overall scale of the program. Well-established programs tend to operate on a larger scale than those that are still in the early stages of operation and expansion. To get a sense of the components that are central to the operation of a learning communities program, the major costs are presented for Santa Ana (see Table 2.2) and Alameda (see 2.3).

Santa Ana's program has been in existence for over a decade, with the majority of the cost going to compensate academic instructors and counselors for their work together during class (that is, sitting in on the learning community partner’s class) and out of class (that is, attending all learning community faculty meetings). Santa Ana’s compensation expenditures are considerably higher because of the number of learning communities offered in the program.

Program coordination is also an important program element. Coordination takes many forms at Santa Ana, but typically it includes oversight and leadership tasks, such as time spent on faculty recruitment and training, organizing professional development events and activities, and maintaining the program’s budget. The learning community coordinators are granted release time in order to take on these responsibilities.

Finally, Santa Ana engages in another program management practice that has potential costs: reserving funds to offset underenrollment in new learning communities, which allows

**Student Support Partnership Integrating Resources and Education**

**Table 2.2**

**Costs of  
Santa Ana College's Learning Communities  
(Academic Year 2007-2008)<sup>a</sup>**

Major Program Element	Cost <sup>b</sup>	Comments
Program coordination	\$7,700	8 units of release time for two coordinators
Instructor and counselor compensation <sup>c</sup>		
Team-teaching	\$56,800	1 unit of release time per instructor to sit in partner's class (40-50 instructors/semester)
Faculty development	\$28,400	1/2 unit of release time per instructor to attend monthly meetings (40-50 instructors/semester)
Team planning time	\$28,400	1/2 unit of release time per instructor to meet 1 hour per week with partner (40-50 instructors/semester)
<b>Total cost of major program elements</b>	<b>\$121,300</b>	
<b>Additional significant costs<sup>d</sup></b>		Faculty instructional time; underenrollment offset funds; administrative oversight; clerical support; overhead; benefits

SOURCES: College's expenditure reports to MDRC; interviews with college staff.

NOTES: <sup>a</sup>Costs are reported for a single academic year during which the program was fully implemented. Funding for the program came from the SSPIRE grant and a combination of institutional funds, in-kind contributions, and coordination with other grants.

<sup>b</sup>Costs are rounded to the nearest \$100.

<sup>c</sup>Faculty hours included on this table do not generate FTES (full-time equivalent student) funding for the college.

<sup>d</sup>Elements included in "Additional significant costs" supported program operations but are difficult to quantify precisely.

more experimentation in terms of pairing courses. Typically, administrators would cancel a class that enrolls under 20 students, so the coordinators make sure to budget (in advance) the funding needed to account for the fact that their new learning communities might not meet this regular course enrollment standard at the college. This gives the faculty of a small new class the opportunity to remain engaged with the program and learn more about how to teach and recruit students for the learning community.

At Alameda, the program coordination team consists of one counselor and one academic instructor who oversee one or two learning communities each semester. Like Santa Ana, the majority of Alameda's program expenditures are for compensating faculty who participate in the program (usually about three to five in a given semester). Alameda's expenditures also

**Student Support Partnership Integrating Resources and Education**

**Table 2.3**

**Costs of College of Alameda's Learning Communities  
(Academic Year 2007-2008)<sup>a</sup>**

Major Program Element	Cost <sup>b</sup>	Comments
Program coordination	\$20,500	702 faculty hours between two coordinators
Textbooks for students	\$10,300	
Teaching Assistant	\$3,000	Teaching assistant in each learning community course
Instructor and counselor compensation <sup>c</sup>	\$24,200	2 hours per week (per course taught) for meetings and student profiling (early alerts, discussion about students in each others' classes, etc.)
<b>Total cost of major program elements</b>	<b>\$58,000</b>	
<b>Additional significant costs<sup>d</sup></b>		Administrative oversight; clerical support; overhead; faculty instructional time; benefits

SOURCES: College's expenditure reports to MDRC; interviews with college staff.

NOTES: <sup>a</sup>Costs are reported for a single academic year during which the program was fully implemented. Funding for the program came from the SSPIRE grant and a combination of institutional funds, in-kind contributions, and coordination with other grants.

<sup>b</sup>Costs are rounded to the nearest \$100.

<sup>c</sup>Faculty hours included on this table do not generate FTES (full-time equivalent student) funding for the college.

<sup>d</sup>Elements included in "Additional significant costs" supported program operations but are difficult to quantify precisely.

include program elements that are not included in Santa Ana's model: Textbooks are purchased for students in the learning communities, and a teaching assistant is hired to attend the learning community courses and work with the students. The smaller scale of Alameda's program (relative to that of Santa Ana's) may make it easier to pay for these elements; fewer students served means that it is affordable for the program to spend money on extra services. While the textbooks, in particular, are a program element that the learning community students greatly appreciate, it is an open question whether future funding will allow this benefit to remain part of the program as it scales up.

This section now turns from an overview of cost elements at the two colleges to a more in-depth consideration of perhaps the most important of those elements — compensation for faculty.

### Faculty Compensation

An important program priority — and at times the biggest concern — across the colleges has been their capacity to compensate academic instructors and counselors for the extra time and effort required to teach in a learning community. Beyond traditional instructional tasks, each college incorporates different program practices that faculty members are expected to adhere to as part of their program involvement. Table 2.4 outlines the colleges' standards for learning community program practices and presents the various forms that compensation has taken at four of the five colleges — a combination of teaching stipends per academic term, release time, and/or other rewards or incentives.<sup>4</sup>

Santa Ana offers instructors and counselors two options for practices that enhance their teaching in learning communities. The first option of payment provides an academic or counseling instructor with one lecture hour equivalent (LHE) for meeting weekly to coordinate with their teaching partner and attending the required learning community monthly meetings; an additional hour-long orientation for new learning community faculty takes place during the hour preceding the Fall Faculty Orientation. Santa Ana offers instructors the option to pick up an additional LHE if they choose to commit at the start of the term to sit in on their teaching partner's class. Faculty can elect either option based on their interest and availability and can change their option plan from semester to semester.

At De Anza, the criteria used to determine the stipends of instructors include the type of learning communities being taught, the amount of curriculum preparation required, the number of times instructors have taught the class, the level of team-teaching counselors and instructors do during a term, and the availability of program funds during a given term. Throughout the SSPIRE grant period, De Anza has awarded quarterly stipends to learning community faculty, ranging from \$150 to \$3,000 based on any combination of these criteria

Compensation at Mt. SAC and Alameda is based on the noninstructional hourly rate of an academic or counseling instructor and on the number of hours each instructor logs in for preparing his or her learning community course during the semester. American River does not

---

<sup>4</sup>Note that the compensation and program practices described here do not reflect learning community program coordination time, which includes program budgeting, course scheduling, and student recruitment. Nor does it include time spent on curriculum development of learning community courses — all activities that go beyond teaching courses but for which learning community faculty may also be responsible.

Student Support Partnership Integrating Resources and Education

Table 2.4

Learning Community Practices and Compensation at Five SSIPE Colleges (Academic Year 2007-2008)

	Practices		Compensation (in addition to standard teaching compensation)
	Team meeting/planning time	Shared class time	Professional development
American River	Teaching teams meet based on need and availability throughout the term.	Varies across teaching teams — shared or visit time not required.	Holds occasional group meetings and training. None
Alameda	Teaching teams meet at least twice a month.	Varies across teaching teams — shared or visit time not required.	Bimonthly Student Success Initiative meetings (2 hours long) are used to discuss learning community updates, challenges, and instructional strategies.
De Anza	Teaching teams meet based on need and availability throughout the term.	Varies across teaching teams — shared or visit time not required.	A required two-day Faculty Summer Institute is dedicated to curricular and teaching team development; also, a one-day workshop per term is dedicated to a learning community training topic.
Mt. SAC	Teaching teams meet based on need and availability throughout the term.	Varies across teaching teams — shared or visit time not required.	A two-day learning community institute held during the semester for team and curriculum development; three 2-hour, all-faculty check-ins per term.
Santa Ana	Teaching teams meet one hour per week.	Varies across teaching teams — shared or visit time not required.	Holds orientation at start of term (1.5 hours); monthly meetings (1.5 hours).
			Academic and counseling instructors can log up to 51 hours (at their noninstructional hourly rates) per term to plan and prepare instruction.
			Varies by prior experience, amount of team-teaching per term, and program funding available per term; counselors receive 10 hours of release from regular counseling duties to work with learning community students/classes.
			Varies — instructors typically log up to 30 hours (at their noninstructional hourly rate) per term to plan and prepare instruction.
			One lecture hour equivalent; one additional lecture hour equivalent if instructors elect to regularly visit their partner's class.

SOURCE: MDRC field research.

offer extra compensation to instructors beyond their standard compensation for teaching a course.

Learning community programs may also pay for noncounseling student services staff to play regular roles within the classroom. For example, the Mt. SAC pre-nursing learning communities hire two peer advisers to support SSPIRE instructors and counselors with a variety of tasks, such as maintaining attendance, leading ice-breakers at the beginning of the semester, and helping plan university field trips and hospital career visits. Additionally, Mt. SAC hires Supplemental Instructors (SIs) — trained tutors — to serve as assistant teachers in the linked classes and to conduct tutoring.

While the capacity to defray the costs of connecting learning communities to counseling and support services is clearly a prerequisite for operating these kinds of projects, monetary resources are only one element of “what it takes.” Another important ingredient of implementing these projects is providing professional development opportunities to staff. This element is discussed in this next section.

### Professional Development in Learning Communities

Since learning communities require faculty and staff to reconsider traditional modes of teaching and learning, many instructors and counselors must learn how to develop new skills and knowledge. Training, orientation, and professional development opportunities aim to provide faculty and staff from the five SSPIRE learning community programs with the time needed to plan collaborative tasks and include lessons about how to incorporate additional academic support services into the classroom.

Most of the SSPIRE colleges carve out time either before or during each academic year (sometimes both) to introduce learning community program principles and objectives to new faculty or staff, to allow time for faculty partners to link curriculum topics and assignments, or to allow them to share best practices with one another. As Table 2.4 indicates, De Anza, Santa Ana, and Mt. SAC incorporate a pre-term or a start-of-term training for faculty involved in their programs. At De Anza, learning community professional development activities had previously included academic instructors but not counselors; with SSPIRE, De Anza has expanded the scope of professional development by inviting counselors to a two-day, off-campus summer institute for its learning community faculty teams to spend time designing their syllabi together. At the end of the summer institute, faculty teams are required to have an outline of their linked courses that reflects cross-content themes, integrated assignments, and team-teaching strategies. Instructors new to learning communities also attend a one-day intensive training workshop before their first term teaching.

The De Anza-led learning community professional development institute has gained such prominence in preparing faculty and staff to work together that a half-day version of the training was offered during an annual all-SSPIRE conference as an approach that would be of interest to faculty and staff from other SSPIRE programs. Moreover, Mt. SAC and American River program coordinators invited De Anza trainers to lead similar trainings for their learning community faculty.

Santa Ana requires learning community faculty to meet monthly to discuss new pedagogical approaches, share course updates, provide peer support, and present promising classroom management strategies to one another. In the monthly meetings, the program coordinators facilitate activities that help faculty develop new strategies to connect students' understanding of student services on campus to course content. For example, an initial strategy called on students in an English class to answer self-evaluative questions to help develop educational or career goals, and then discuss these goals in their counseling class in order to identify the campus student services would best support them in reaching these goals.

Complementing their campus-based learning community professional development efforts during the course of the SSPIRE grant, faculty from two of the SSPIRE colleges — Alameda and Mt. SAC — attended a national five-day Learning Communities institute at the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education, based at Evergreen State College.<sup>5</sup> The institute gave college teams a chance to spend time on efforts to strengthen their learning community models.<sup>6</sup>

## **Analyzing Data to Inform Learning Community Program Improvement**

Program coordinators and faculty in learning communities know that data analysis can play a critical role in better understanding if and how the learning community experience may be associated with improved academic outcomes (such as grades or course completion) for students. This section provides a case study of how De Anza uses data analysis to inform practice and then discusses efforts to collect and analyze data at all five SSPIRE learning community colleges.

---

<sup>5</sup>Santa Ana and De Anza learning community teams have participated in the Evergreen trainings also, but before they received the SSPIRE grant.

<sup>6</sup>For more information, see: <http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/home.asp>.



### **How did De Anza College use data to understand and strengthen its learning communities?**

De Anza has offered learning communities since 1997 — nine years before SPSIRE was launched. During the last decade, De Anza has conducted its own research on the success of its learning community students, especially those who place into developmental reading and writing. In the course of the SPSIRE initiative, De Anza worked with Cal-PASS and MDRC to supplement this research with descriptive, longitudinal data on its learning community students and various comparison groups. These data served to deepen De Anza's understanding about the achievement trends among its learning communities students.

De Anza's pre-SPSIRE research showed that between 1999 and 2004, the pass rate for new students enrolled in the learning community that pairs the highest-level developmental reading and writing courses was roughly the same as that of new students who took the equivalent developmental writing class outside of the learning community. However, successful learning community students then went on to attempt the first transfer-level English class at higher rates than students who had taken the developmental writing class. Overall, about 75 percent of students who started in the developmental reading and writing learning community went on to complete college English, compared with about 64 percent of students who started in the stand-alone developmental writing class.

These data were shared with senior administrators at De Anza to advocate for the learning community approach to teaching developmental reading and writing. The learning communities' coordinators were convinced by these data that they were on the right track, and they believed that participation in SPSIRE could help the college expand and strengthen its learning communities. After the launch of SPSIRE, more than 1,300 students participated in a learning community at De Anza during academic years 2006-2007 and 2007-2008 (see Table 2.1); nearly half of these students were in developmental reading and writing learning communities. Among developmental reading and writing students, women and African-Americans are more likely than their peers to enroll in learning communities as opposed to stand-alone developmental writing courses.

During SPSIRE, program coordinators maintained their commitment to use data for program review and improvement. Two key indicators were regularly tracked for SPSIRE participants — course success rates and persistence rates — and broken out for those who attempted developmental reading and writing learning communities. The course success rate data for students in the developmental reading and writing learning communities are promising and are comparable with the success rates in these learning communities before SPSIRE began:

- 84 percent of learning community students passed the learning community one level below transfer during the 2006-2007 and 2007-2008 academic years.
- 79 percent of learning community students passed the newly developed learning community two levels below transfer during the 2006-2007 and 2007-2008 academic years.

As part of the SSPIRE initiative, several new sections of the developmental reading and writing learning community were launched, with a counseling class included in the link. According to data from De Anza, during the 2007-2008 academic year, the course success rates of the learning communities with the counseling class (four sections serving about 100 students) exceeded 90 percent — higher than the overall developmental reading and writing learning community success rates during the time that SSPIRE was operating. While this increase could be the result of any combination of factors, such as a changing student population or differences between faculty grading standards or quality of teaching, the learning community coordinators at De Anza believe that the higher success rates are largely attributable to the addition of the counseling class.

Data available in Cal-PASS also made it possible to compare outcome measures for students who enrolled in developmental-level learning communities during SSPIRE with outcomes for students who attempted developmental reading and writing outside of a learning community. Readers are reminded that this is not a rigorous comparison, because the data do not control for differences between students who attempted these courses within and outside of learning communities. As stated above, demographic differences exist between these two groups, and differences in other unmeasured factors, such as high school performance, students' motivation, family income, and educational levels, may also exist.

The analysis examined one measure of success — the course pass rate — and two measures of persistence. Both the course pass rate and persistence data for students who attempted developmental reading and writing learning communities varied by term and differed from students who attempted developmental reading and writing outside of learning communities (see Table 2.5). Overall, the pass rates and persistence rates of learning community students are higher than these outcomes for the comparison group:

- In total, 82 percent of students who attempted developmental reading and writing in a learning community passed the course, compared with 77 percent of students who attempted developmental reading and writing outside of a learning community.

Student Support Partnership Integrating Resources and Education

Table 2.5

**Outcomes for Students in De Anza College's  
Developmental Reading and Writing Learning Communities,  
Compared with Students in Stand-Alone Developmental Reading and Writing Courses,  
By Semester of Enrollment<sup>a</sup>**

Indicator	Learning Community		Students in Stand-Alone	
	Students	<i>Number of students</i>	Classes	<i>Number of students</i>
Course pass rate (%)				
Fall 2006	89.8	127	78.8	1,444
Winter 2007	79.0	138	78.6	1,171
Spring 2007	75.4	57	69.0	829
Fall 2007	80.1	141	78.7	1,490
<b>Total</b>	81.9	402	77.2	4,127
Persistence to next term (%)				
Fall 2006	90.6	127	89.2	1,444
Winter 2007	94.9	138	87.5	1,171
Spring 2007 <sup>b</sup>	56.1	57	46.2	829
Fall 2007	90.8	141	86.4	1,490
<b>Total</b>	87.1	402	80.7	4,127
Persistence to next year (%)				
Fall 2006	84.3	127	80.3	1,444
Winter 2007	84.8	138	84.5	1,171
Spring 2007	86.0	57	87.1	829
<b>Total</b>	84.1	271	83.4	2,637

SOURCE: Cal-PASS.

NOTES: <sup>a</sup>This table compares outcomes of students who attempted a developmental reading and writing learning community (LART 100, LART 200) with outcomes of students who attempted developmental reading and writing courses outside of a learning community (Fundamentals of Writing, Preparatory Reading and Writing Skills, Reading Fundamentals, and Developmental Reading). Students are grouped by the semester in which they enrolled in either the learning community or the stand-alone classes.

Limitations to this comparison include the small sample for learning communities and an inability to control for background characteristics or motivation levels of students.

<sup>b</sup>For students who enrolled in the courses in question during spring 2007, "Persistence to Next Term" is the percentage of students who enrolled during the summer 2007 term; for this reason, these numbers tend to be lower for both Learning Community students and students in stand-alone classes than those for persistence after other semesters.

- In total, 87 percent of students who attempted developmental reading and writing in a learning community persisted to the next term, compared with 81 percent of students who attempted developmental reading and writing outside of a learning community.
- In total, 84 percent of students who attempted developmental reading and writing in a learning community persisted to the next academic year, roughly equal to the 83 percent of students who attempted developmental reading and writing outside of a learning community.

These findings were roughly comparable with those detected in other studies of learning communities.<sup>7</sup> Although not shown in Table 2.5, among the first two developmental reading and writing learning community cohorts (fall 2006 and winter 2007), more than 60 percent were still enrolled at De Anza four quarters after initially taking part in a learning community.<sup>8</sup>

De Anza also worked with Cal-PASS to conduct a special analysis on transfer rates of learning community students to San José State University, by linking institutional data on 3,000 learning community students between 2001 and 2007 with Cal-PASS data from San José State. Transfer to a four-year college is an institutional priority at De Anza, and these data helped faculty and administrators better understand the long-term achievements of its learning community students.

The analysis revealed that transfer rates for learning community students were similar to rates for non-learning community students — roughly 10 percent. Moreover, grade point averages at San José State were about the same for learning community and non-learning community De Anza transfer students. The analysis also documented that a slightly higher percentage of developmental reading and writing learning community students transfer to San José State than their non-learning community counterparts. This last finding was critical for the learning communities' coordinators, who now have longitudinal evidence that students in the college's developmental learning communities are transferring to a four-year college and that participation in the learning communities may increase the likelihood that a developmental-level student will transfer to a four-year college.

The learning communities coordinators at De Anza have a long history of producing and using a wealth of interesting data on student persistence and performance in the learning communities and in those learning communities as enhanced by SSPIRE. As discussed in Chapter 1, these data are used to paint a picture of what happens when students, particularly developmental-level students, enroll in learning communities at De Anza; based on these data, the coordinators

---

<sup>7</sup>Engstrom and Tinto, 2008; Scrivener et al., 2008.

<sup>8</sup>Cal-PASS

and administrators have seen a pattern of modest improvement that reinforces their commitment to integrating student services into their existing learning communities program.

In addition to the quantitative analyses described above, the coordinators at De Anza conduct ongoing qualitative research to learn about and improve how the learning communities are implemented in the classroom. Most notably, De Anza uses student feedback to help instructors refine their approach to teaching in learning communities. Program coordinators conduct facilitated student focus groups, called Small Group Instructional Feedback (SGIF), in each new instructor's learning community classroom and in the classrooms of many of the more experienced instructors as well. The SGIFs take place midway through the term and are based on a structured discussion of how students are experiencing the course and what issues or questions they may have. The coordinator then provides this feedback to the instructors to help them adjust their teaching to best meet their students' needs. The coordinators also use this feedback to identify common issues across classes and teaching teams and include these topics in the summer institute or other trainings for learning community faculty.

### **Key Lessons Learned Through Efforts to Collect and Analyze Data**

While the case study above focuses on De Anza, coordinators at all five SSPIRE learning community colleges note that SSPIRE produced a new level of understanding and sophistication in their ability to look at their students' data and interpret these data to shape program improvements. American River, Mt. SAC and De Anza coordinators worked with MDRC data consultants to investigate typical attitudes and behaviors of students in their learning communities, as reported by their Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) respondents. Two of the colleges used CCSSE to "oversample" students enrolled in learning communities in order to compare them with students in similar courses. Mt. SAC found that students in their SSPIRE developmental math learning communities reported higher levels of engagement on all five CCSSE benchmarks for effective educational practice.<sup>9</sup> At American River, students taking the SSPIRE developmental reading/writing course reported higher levels of engagement on active and collaborative learning, compared with students taking stand-alone developmental reading and writing course. But in the other four benchmarks of effective practice, students in American River's SSPIRE courses reported levels of engagement comparable with those in similar courses.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup>These practices are: active and collaborative learning, student effort, academic challenge, student-faculty interaction, and support for learners.

<sup>10</sup>Learning community students may differ in many regards from other students in similar courses, and because of the small number of students in the comparisons above, it cannot be determined whether the differences reported in CCSSE are the result of the learning community program or other unmeasured factors.

At Santa Ana, learning community instructors take surveys to test their knowledge of student services and to find out whether they have included these services in their learning communities courses, first during their pre-fall semester orientation meeting, then again by the end of the year. Highlights of the 2006-2007 results show that instructors increased their awareness of student services from the pre-test given in August to the post-test in December of that same year. When asked, “Do you engage your students in activities that involve the curriculum and content of your partner’s course and that involve Student Services?”, only 31 percent answered “yes” on the August pre-test, while 71 percent answered “yes” on the December post-test.

Many of the program coordinators across the five colleges recognize that having data that efficiently track students’ progress and overall enrollment trends is valuable in helping them make adjustments to their program models, scheduling activities, and developing student intervention strategies. For those coordinating new learning community programs, the process begins with learning how to collect and disseminate data for the first time. For instance, Alameda hired a campus researcher to put in place a system to track learning community students as they enroll in and persist through (or do not persist through) the program. Though the initial data collected were from a small student participant sample, the researcher has begun to conduct a longitudinal analysis of academic performance, enrollment, and persistence rates of students in learning communities and to compare their performance outcomes (such as grades or units attempted/completed) over time with non-learning community students in similar courses — something that this young program had not been able to do before.

## **Integrating Student Services: Maturity and Growing Pains for Learning Community Programs**

While the five colleges have somewhat different learning community program approaches and aims, it is safe to say that the accomplishments and challenges of each college can be tied to how long the programs have existed and whether the coordinators of each of the programs learned lessons that helped them make necessary changes and improvements. De Anza and Santa Ana’s learning community programs are well known and well regarded within the larger campus community. The high standing of their programs can be attributed to a combination of factors, including the long-time presence of the program’s coordinators on the campus, the cultivation of influential learning community faculty who eventually become flag-bearers of the programs, and the strong relationships between the coordinators and supportive deans and vice presidents who deem the programs successful and champion the program model to other administrators. An illustration of this support can be found at Santa Ana, where a vice president empowered the Dean of Counseling to provide direct support to the faculty coordinators who run the program. This support involved the assigned dean working with deans from

other divisions, managing the project budget, and tending to other administrative tasks that faculty coordinators often find difficult or impossible to carry out on their own.

The newer learning community programs at Alameda and American River (and to a lesser degree, Mt. SAC) have dealt with struggles not uncommon to the early stages of initial program development and establishment. A large part of Alameda's work in the first year was related to the challenges of creating the new program: choosing classes to link, revising schedules and the registration system to accommodate the links, and handling the administrative aspects of creating a new program. The initial learning community model at Alameda required students to take five classes together as a cohort in their first semester, but when this structure proved to be too ambitious, the model was scaled back to two to three linked courses per semester. This made it more appealing for students who need to have flexible course schedules in order to meet work-related or personal obligations. American River, meanwhile, first struggled to get its newly linked developmental reading/writing course passed through the college's curriculum approval process and then experienced difficulty getting it included as part of the course scheduling plan.

Although these initial struggles caused setbacks to program development, program coordinators from Mt. SAC, American River, and Alameda can find solace in knowing that administrators and faculty at Santa Ana and De Anza acknowledged having similar struggles when they first began their learning community programs. Moreover, the longevity of the programs at Santa Ana and De Anza is built on a history of academic faculty, counselors, and administrators overcoming these struggles together. At both colleges, a shining example of this buy-in and commitment came in similarly difficult situations, when budget constraints before SSPIRE left the programs unable to offer faculty stipends but virtually every faculty member in the program chose to teach in learning communities anyway.

## **The Future of SSPIRE Learning Communities**

Like most California community colleges, the SSPIRE learning community colleges' main concerns revolve around the state's recent dire budget limitations. They are well aware of the implications these constraints have on funding their learning community programs. Though program coordinators and administrators have made assurances that their programs will continue even after SSPIRE funding ends, they recognize that they will be making tough decisions about reducing or eliminating some of the elements of their programs or even needing to drastically change the scope of their programs. Program coordinators must do so at a time when rapid increases in student enrollment are being anticipated, which will further stretch their institution's capacity to sustain learning communities and will make them compete for funding with other campus programs.

Given these challenges, some of the learning community colleges have begun to find new and creative ways to keep their programs alive. Santa Ana's administrators, for example, are now looking to develop a cost-benefit model that compares the cost of running learning communities (and how much they have spent per student) with the benefits of increased student persistence (for example, matriculation and course completion) and performance (grades). They hope to use this model to convey the importance of maintaining their learning community program at a high level of quality to ensure the continued success of students who are part of the program. At Mt. SAC, program instructors and counselors are piloting an eight-week online workshop module so that students get a "refresher" on science terminology and fundamental concepts in advanced science courses before their second year in the program. As mentioned previously, the learning community program loses about half the students in a cohort by the second year, and counselors and instructors want to improve the success rates of students who persist into the second year. Other colleges are working with their campus administrators to draw on funds from the Basic Skills Initiative (BSI) grant. De Anza, for instance, will use BSI money to continue its learning community Summer Institute, while Alameda program coordinators are encouraging the BSI committee to dedicate some funding to expanding the number of learning communities they offer on campus.

Three of the five SSPIRE colleges also made (or will soon make) changes in their program's leadership. Alameda, for instance, has used three different program coordination teams during the course of its SSPIRE grant, while also enduring changes in the president and vice president who were closely tied to their programs' development. De Anza also experienced changes in its program coordinator structure, as one coordinator retired and another stepped down to take over another campus leadership post. At Santa Ana, one of the long-time co-coordinators recently retired as well, changing the make-up of the program coordination team. Anticipating these changes, the three colleges promoted seasoned learning community counselors and instructors as new co-coordinators to make the leadership transition smoother and to revisit program goals and improvements for the future.

### **The Legacy of SSPIRE at the Learning Community Colleges**

The five learning community programs have made notable strides not only in getting academic instructors and counselors to work more closely together, but also in solidifying ties between academic and student services departments across the campus. De Anza's faculty coordinators and the counseling department worked hard to smooth over their initial competing interests so that counselors could participate in the program and still carry out their everyday responsibilities. At Santa Ana, the pre-and post-tests that learning community instructors take to gauge their knowledge of student services on campus build knowledge for the faculty, who can in turn transmit that knowledge to students in their classes who need these services but may not seek them out.



Equally important are the institution-wide efforts that these programs have spawned to integrate academic instruction and student services. At Alameda, for example, the Student Success Initiative (SSI) — a new cross-department committee comprised of administrators, instructors, and student service staff — was created as a result of learning community coordinators reaching out to their larger campus community to receive feedback and support for the program. Now, SSI meets bimonthly to monitor the progress of initiatives, such as their new learning communities, and brings together departments and programs that formerly did not meet in order to pool their resources and make collective campus-wide decisions.

Other colleges use their newfound partnerships not only to further their program efforts but also to model to their peers on campus how to work together. For instance, Mt. SAC's academic instructors and student service program coordinators associated with SSPIRE make presentations together on campus to recruit more faculty and student services staff to learning communities, summer "bridge" programs, or any other joint partnership programs. They make presentations about the different roles instructors and counselors take on as part of their program, and they orient new faculty and staff about opportunities to work collaboratively with others on campus.

Whether the efforts of the five learning community colleges to promote integration are limited to the classrooms in their learning communities or extend across campus, collectively they are promising attempts to reorganize once isolated departments into more interdependent and productive entities that aim to promote student success.



## Chapter 3

# Creating a Drop-In Study Center: Merced College's Story

Situated in the heart of California's Central Valley, Merced College serves a rural community of many immigrant groups. The students at this midsize college reflect this population; over one-third of the students are Hispanic, and about 60 percent of all students receive some type of financial aid.<sup>1</sup> Like most community colleges, Merced is primarily a commuter campus, and the planners of Merced's SSPIRE program believed that many students would benefit from having more contact with college faculty and staff outside of the traditional classroom setting. They based this belief on the growing body of research that suggests that if students feel more connected to the college and their instructors, they are more likely to persist in their studies.<sup>2</sup>

With the goal of increasing students' connections to their instructors and the college, Merced developed a clear strategy for its SSPIRE program: create a setting that increases and enhances students' interaction with both academic faculty and student services staff, in a venue where students can receive academic assistance and more general guidance or referrals to other support services. A secondary motivation was to improve the connections of part-time faculty to the campus, so special efforts were made to include part-time faculty in the mix of instructors who staff the program.

**Study Central** is a dedicated space on campus where students come to study, work in small groups, or receive guidance and/or tutoring from faculty and student peer mentors. Study Central also sponsors special workshops for students and faculty.

## An Overview of Study Central

The start of the fall 2006 semester saw the launch of Merced's SSPIRE program with the opening of Study Central: an area at the front of the college cafeteria where students can drop in for academic assistance, guidance, or student service referrals from the faculty and staff who work there. Students also use Study Central as an informal gathering place to work together with friends, classmates, or study groups.

Study Central is staffed by a cadre of instructors, counselors, student peer guides, and even a dean, who each work there one or two hours per week. Study Central is typically open when the most students are on campus — nine in the morning through early afternoon, and into

---

<sup>1</sup>Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2008. Data for 2006-2007 academic year.

<sup>2</sup>Merced's SSPIRE planners refer to findings from CCSSE, Vincent Tinto, and W. Norton Grubb.

the evening one night per week. At any given time, there is generally one faculty member present (faculty work one-hour shifts at Study Central) alongside student peer guides. To support the program's goal of strengthening connections between Merced faculty and students, the coordinators have made concerted efforts to reach beyond the core faculty who tend to be most involved in special projects on campus to recruit full- and part-time faculty from diverse disciplines to staff Study Central.

While Study Central is open to all students, it is targeted primarily to those who may need the assistance most — in particular, students who are young, economically disadvantaged, or taking developmental-level courses. Study Central seeks to integrate student services and instruction by offering primarily academic assistance (often from regular classroom instructors) outside of the classroom setting.

Over the course of the initiative, additional components have been added to the program. The college Reading and Writing Center, which was created with the support of an earlier grant,<sup>3</sup> was folded into Study Central, offering students the opportunity to sign up for more focused one-on-one assistance in writing, as opposed to the informal drop-in assistance generally offered at Study Central. As students' use of Study Central grew, and the coordinators began to see common student needs, they created workshops to address these needs. Several times each semester, the faculty offer free drop-in workshops on topics such as “How to read your math textbook,” “Organizational skills and stress management,” and “How to write the scholarship essay.”

The college estimates that close to 100 students visit Study Central each week, and about 400 students visit at least once in each semester (with many of these students returning regularly throughout the term). The workshops generally attract around 40 students each.

## **Study Central in Operation**

This section takes a closer look at the students who use Study Central; the faculty, staff and administrators who work with the program; some promising practices and strategies employed in the program; and the costs of these efforts.

### **The Students Who Come to Study Central**

Study Central is open to all students, and with its visible location at the front of the cafeteria any student may walk in and ask for assistance or simply sit down and study. But many

---

<sup>3</sup>The Reading and Writing Center was one of several programs that came out of the Faculty Inquiry Groups that were at the heart of Merced's involvement in Strengthening Pre-collegiate Education in Community Colleges (SPECC).

students also come to Study Central in other ways. A survey conducted by the Study Central coordinators revealed that the students heard of the program from an instructor more often than from any other source.

As might be expected, the students who use Study Central are not necessarily representative of all students at the college. Table 3.1 compares a sample of participants (those who agreed to fill out a short information form after using Study Central or attending an academic workshop sponsored by Study Central) with the overall study body at Merced. The table suggests that African-American and Asian students use Study Central disproportionately to their representation at the college, as do women and students who are between the ages of 20 and 24. (These data do not indicate whether the students in Study Central are more motivated or prepared for college than the average student).

The program's coordinators make concerted efforts to reach students who are at risk of failure or dropping out, in order to help students whom they believe can benefit most from Study Central. One of the primary ways they do this is by focusing their recruitment on developmental-level courses, where students have been shown to be less likely to complete their studies than students in higher-level courses. By talking to students in these classrooms about the services available at Study Central, faculty can explain how these services will help students in the specific class. For example, a math instructor may refer students to a workshop for overcoming math anxiety before giving them their first test of the semester. These in-class referrals may increase the number of students who use Study Central and may also help students understand how support services can directly help them succeed in their classes.

A number of instructors also offer students extra credit for going to Study Central or attending the academic workshops. Surveys of students at the workshops reveal that while many of the students like the workshops, some say they wouldn't have come if their instructors hadn't told them to. Study Central's coordinators share these findings with developmental class instructors, encourage them to send more students to Study Central and the workshops, and promote the use of extra credit to further boost student participation. Study Central coordinators also encourage faculty to institute an informal early-warning system by identifying students who are falling behind in their classes and referring them to Study Central for assistance.

### **Location, Location, Location**

In order to operate Study Central, the college obviously needed to dedicate a physical place to this service. As is true on many college campuses, Merced's physical facilities are often overtaxed, and there are competing demands for many of the places where a center such as Study Central could exist. To secure a location, Merced's SSPIRE coordinators obtained approval from administrators to offer services in the front of the cafeteria. Initially, there were

**Student Support Partnership Integrating Resources and Education**

**Table 3.1**

**Demographic Characteristics of Study Central Sample,  
Compared with All Merced College Students  
(Academic Year 2007-2008)**

Characteristic	Study Central Sample	All Students
Gender <sup>a</sup> (%)		
Female	74.2	60.8
Male	25.8	39.2
Race/ethnicity (%)		
African-American	11.9	5.5
Asian	18.2	8.3
Hispanic	42.0	38.2
White	22.2	37.9
Other <sup>b</sup>	5.7	10.1
Age <sup>c</sup> (%)		
19 years old or under	24.7	34.3
20 - 24 years old	28.0	16.0
25 years old and over	46.7	49.6
<b>Total Students<sup>d</sup></b>	<b>369<sup>e</sup></b>	<b>30,000</b>

SOURCE: Cal-PASS.

NOTES: <sup>a</sup>Excludes “unknown” for gender.

<sup>b</sup>Other includes Filipino, Pacific Islander, Native American, Other, and Uncollected.

<sup>c</sup>Some age columns may not add to 100% because of missing data.

<sup>d</sup>Total students reflects the headcount, not FTES (full-time equivalent student) count.

<sup>e</sup>This number is lower than the total number of students served, due to sampling techniques. Merced estimates that Study Central serves 400 students each semester.

conflicts over how the space would be used, the types of signage and storage, and other logistics. Over the course of the program, the coordinators worked with the people responsible for this space and forged a relationship that allowed them to tailor the space to their needs. As discussed later in this chapter, in spring 2009, Study Central was moved to a newly renovated, dedicated space on campus.

### **The Role of Faculty in Study Central**

With the goal not just of providing students with support services, but of connecting students with faculty in the process, faculty are clearly central to the SSPIRE program at Merced. A majority of the faculty who staff Study Central and run the academic workshops are academic instructors (a few are counselors who may also teach counseling courses in addition to offering traditional counseling). Placed in a student service setting outside of the classroom, these instructors help Merced bridge the gap between traditional academic instruction and student services for the students and instructors in Study Central.

Recruiting faculty for this work has been an ongoing task of the SSPIRE coordinators at Merced. As noted, the coordinators make a special effort to reach out to part-time instructors, who typically spend their time on campus only teaching in the classroom, isolated from other faculty, activities, or services. These part-time faculty often split their time between colleges, do not have office hours, and tend to have only limited knowledge of the students, services, or other faculty on campus. Many part-time faculty express interest in Study Central, but ironically, those who have already committed the most hours to the college are unable to participate because of a cap on their allowable workload per semester.<sup>4</sup>

But many others are able to participate, and these faculty have generally been enthusiastic about the program and their participation. Faculty often note that because Study Central gives them an opportunity to work with students outside the classroom in an informal setting, it not only provides students with a chance to see instructors in a new light, but it can also give instructors a chance to see students differently. A part-time instructor noted, “It’s a nice way of finding where our students are at, and what they’re comfortable with.”

The program coordinators have offered occasional formal professional development activities to these faculty, though for at least two reasons, securing their participation in these activities has reportedly been more difficult than imagined. First, many of the most interested part-time faculty are at their full workload and are not allowed to participate in further paid (or unpaid) hours of work at the college. Another factor making professional development difficult — as observed at several campuses in SSPIRE — may be that full- and part-time faculty often

---

<sup>4</sup>Like most other colleges, Merced limits the number of hours part-time faculty can work at the college.

want or need different types of training. At Merced and other community colleges, it is often noted that whereas full-time faculty are generally interested in professional development that focuses on pedagogy, part-time faculty are often more interested in learning the nuts-and-bolts of campus activities, practices, and policies. For example, part-time faculty may want to learn more about campus hiring policies, course offerings outside of their division, and the types and locations of student services available on campus — all topics about which full-time faculty tend to be much better informed. But despite these differences in faculty needs, those who work in Study Central report that when part-time and full-time faculty work together toward the program's common goal, the two groups gain a better understanding of one another.

Besides bridging differences between part-time and full-time instructors, faculty also say that working in Study Central gives them a new and more complete understanding of their faculty peers in different disciplines and strengthens understanding between the academic instruction and counseling divisions. And a number of faculty involved in the program think that it benefits not only their own relationships with their peers but also — more importantly — their students. This feeling about the value of the program, along with the pay that Study Central instructors receive, has helped build a solid base of support for Study Central among faculty from a range of disciplines who work in the program.

### **Student Peer Guides**

While building the connection between faculty and students is a major component of the program at Merced, the faculty who work in Study Central are also supplemented by student peer guides, who were introduced in the second year of SSPIRE. These student workers are recruited and trained in coordination with the tutorial training on campus and offer general support to students in much the same way that faculty do. Student peer guides also staff the Reading and Writing Center.

The student peer guides may offer several benefits to Study Central and the college: First, they can serve as mentors to other students and offer a less threatening point of access for students who may be intimidated by faculty. Second, as will be discussed later, these peer guides are — simply put — far less expensive to employ than faculty. And finally, the SSPIRE coordinators and administrators feel that working with peer guides may help build student leadership at the college by giving these students training, responsibility, pay, and a visible role working with faculty and other students toward student success.

### **Coordination and Administrative Support**

As is true for any program, operating Study Central at Merced requires more than the day-to-day staffing. The general coordination of SSPIRE, including Study Central and the related workshops and Reading and Writing Center, has been the task of several people. These



staff are responsible for tasks such as recruiting students into the program, ensuring that faculty and student peer guides are hired and trained, and doing the often unrecognized work of budgeting and monitoring.

Merced's SSPIRE coordinators also work with other programs on campus to ensure that their efforts support each other when possible. For example, staff from the California Work Opportunities and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) welfare-to-work program created a booklet about student services at Merced that students in Study Central can use to understand and identify other useful services on campus. Also, the coordinators of the two programs arranged services so that CalWORKs students — students receiving public assistance — can count their hours at Study Central as supervised study time and thus receive child care reimbursement for their time spent there.

Besides working within and across programs, SSPIRE coordinators at times seek out the support of top administrators of the college. Securing a location for Study Central, arranging funding and pay structures for faculty and peer guides, and coordinating with the college's larger goals require meetings with — and the active support of — deans, vice presidents, and occasionally the college president to ensure the stability and sustainability of the program. As the college implements the Basic Skills Initiative (BSI), Study Central coordinators have worked with top administrators to ensure that the program helps the college move toward meeting the BSI's goal of strengthening the basic skills of students in developmental courses. Study Central coordinators have also used this effort as an opportunity to make the case for using BSI funds to support the Study Central program.

### **A Clear and Consistent Message**

The coordinators of SSPIRE at Merced meet regularly not only with administrators but also with the faculty and peer guides at Study Central to create and convey a clear message about the goals and successes of the program. Some of the ways that the coordinators have used data to promote this message are discussed later in this chapter.

A clear and common understanding of the program appears to be shared by a wide range of faculty, staff, and administrators at Merced who are involved in the program. For example, these people often point to similar motivations for the program, such as the belief that connecting students to their campus and instructors will lead to increased persistence. As one faculty member noted, "We're a diverse group of people, but we're on the same page."

### **The Costs of SSPIRE at Merced**

Like the other SSPIRE colleges, Merced created and maintains its program with a combination of funding sources: the SSPIRE grant, institutional funds, in-kind contributions, and

coordination with other grants. Table 3.2 presents a description of the major elements that these funds supported at Merced in academic year 2007-2008.

As shown in Table 3.2, hourly pay for faculty members was the single largest expenditure in the SSPIRE program. With Study Central open around 25 hours per week, the costs for these instructors and counselors who staff the drop-in center are about \$40,000 per year, with additional costs for faculty to run the periodic academic workshops. In addition to the faculty member who is present at any time Study Central is open, there is typically also one student peer guide and sometimes a second peer guide to staff the Reading and Writing Center (though for more limited hours than Study Central). Peer guides are paid \$10 per hour, and the annual cost of employing five or six of these students to staff Study Central and the Reading and Writing Center part time totals approximately \$10,000. The general coordination of SSPIRE has been the task of several people, equaling about 65 percent of the time of a full-time employee, at a cost of about \$25,000 per year.

The most notable other cost of Study Central is for the location itself. While the college estimated the cost of the physical space and utilities for Study Central at around \$30,000 in 2007-2008, the true cost of this location is most realistically viewed as the sacrifice of this space to Study Central instead of to other college or student organizations.

In addition to tracking the costs of the program, Merced's SSPIRE coordinators make notable efforts to measure its benefits. The following section discusses some of the ways they have used data to strengthen their program and begin to measure its benefits.

### **How Did Study Central Coordinators Use Data to Understand and Strengthen the Program?**

From the beginning of SSPIRE, data collection and analysis was an important activity at Merced. The Study Central coordinators regularly collected information from participants and analyzed these data in order to inform program improvement. A question of initial interest to the coordinators was the location of Study Central and its conduciveness to studying; also important was the way that faculty interacted with students who visited Study Central. To learn about these issues, Merced conducted focus groups of students and faculty and administered informal surveys to students at Study Central and its sponsored workshops.

Early on, the data suggested to Merced's SSPIRE coordinators that students wanted faculty to approach them and ask if they needed any help; in fact, 109 of 121 Study Central participants surveyed said that they like it when an instructor or counselor asks them if they need help. This information was critical, because initially faculty at Study Central had been unsure about whether to approach students; many faculty members had thought that unsolicited

**Student Support Partnership Integrating Resources and Education**

**Table 3.2**

**Costs of Merced College's Study Central (Academic Year 2007-2008)<sup>a</sup>**

Major Program Element	Cost <sup>b</sup>	Comments
Faculty hours in Study Central <sup>c</sup>	\$42,000	22-25 faculty members working one or two hours per week, at overload hourly rate; stipends for academic workshops
Student peer guides	\$9,800	5-6 part-time student workers, at \$10 per hour
Program coordination	\$25,000	6 hours per week of release time for faculty coordinator 19 hours per week for assistant coordinator Stipend for faculty coordinator of Reading and Writing Center
<b>Total cost of major program elements</b>	<b>\$76,800</b>	
<b>Additional significant costs<sup>d</sup></b>		Facilities/utilities; administrative oversight; clerical support; overhead; benefits; faculty training

SOURCES: College's expenditure reports to MDRC; interviews with college staff.

NOTES: <sup>a</sup>Costs are reported for a single academic year during which the program was fully implemented. Funding for the program came from the SSPIRE grant and a combination of institutional funds, in-kind contributions, and coordination with other grants.

<sup>b</sup>Costs are rounded to the nearest \$100.

<sup>c</sup>Faculty hours included on this table do not generate FTES (full-time equivalent student) funding for the college.

<sup>d</sup>Elements included in "Additional significant costs" supported program operations but are difficult to quantify precisely.

contact with students was not desirable. The survey led to a change of practice, with faculty being told to proactively engage Study Central students rather than wait to be approached.

The focus groups also revealed information on how the program was working for students. These regular conversations with students raised important issues about what Study Central was doing well and what students would like to see done differently. For example, the focus group participants were especially grateful that they could eat and drink in Study Central, because no other academic location on campus allowed food and beverages. At the same time, students expressed the opinion that Study Central was a good idea but was placed in the wrong location; they wanted an accessible place that was not as loud as the cafeteria but not as quiet as the library.

The data collected by the Study Central coordinators also revealed that both students and faculty appreciated the study skills workshops sponsored by Study Central; in fact, instructors were quite enthusiastic about these workshops, encouraged students to attend, and sometimes gave extra credit to students who did.

Merced's SSPIRE coordinators also took advantage of the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) that was administered in spring 2007, relatively soon after the launch of Study Central. This national survey of community college students provided the Study Central coordinators with a broader picture of how Merced students were engaged with college faculty and staff, other students, and the subject matter they study. Of particular interest — given the focus of Study Central as a support service for students — was the CCSSE benchmark “Support for Learners,” a national indicator of the extent to which students feel the institution gives support to students as learners. On this benchmark, Merced performed below the national norm — an outcome that prompted the Study Central coordinators to participate in a SSPIRE-sponsored CCSSE workshop at the 2007 Student Success Conference in San José, California, and also to host an on-campus workshop with faculty in April 2008, to address this issue.

During the faculty workshop, participants learned that Merced students were less satisfied than the national average of community college students with academic advising, financial aid advising, and peer or other tutoring. In fact, as SSPIRE began at Merced, CCSSE data indicated that:

- Of all students (not just those at Study Central), 19 percent were very satisfied with academic advising, compared with 28 percent of students in the national sample.
- Of all students, 19 percent were very satisfied with financial aid advising, compared with 25 percent of students in the national sample.
- Of all students, 13 percent were very satisfied with peer or other tutoring, compared with 17 percent of students in the national sample.

The CCSSE data and internal survey and focus group data provided the Study Central coordinators with evidence that academic and social support services needed improvement at Merced. These data also suggested that Study Central might provide that improvement, especially because other data, such as information from the focus groups, had indicated that Study Central participants — both students and instructors — felt that Study Central and its sponsored workshops were beneficial. Yet these data fell short of showing if Study Central would lead to increased success of students at Merced — a concern that senior administrators raised with the Study Central coordinators.

To address this issue, Study Central coordinators collected additional information on a sample of Study Central participants during the 2007-2008 academic year. Student identification numbers were collected from students who attended the academic workshops, and some students filled out information forms after they had been given help by faculty or staff during

Study Central. These data were then matched with the existing records on student enrollment and performance that are provided annually to the California Partnership to Achieve Student Success (Cal-PASS).

MDRC used data from Cal-PASS to analyze course success and persistence rates for a group of SSPIRE students who attempted developmental math or English during academic year 2007-2008 and shared the results with program coordinators at Merced. As Table 3.3 shows, members of the Study Central sample passed two “gatekeeper” developmental courses at higher rates than average: 78 percent of the sample passed the highest level of developmental English, compared with 54 percent of all students; 56 percent of the sample passed the highest level of developmental math, compared with 47 percent of all students.

In addition, all of the students in the Study Central sample who attempted either of these developmental courses in fall 2007 returned to Merced for the subsequent semester; this persistence rate is higher than the 73 percent of the comparison group who persisted from fall 2007 to spring 2008.

When a dean at Merced saw these numbers, she reacted enthusiastically, because the course success and persistence rates for this sample of students who used Study Central indicated that the program might be helping these developmental students at Merced College succeed and continue in their education at higher rates than average.

While these data demonstrate a positive trend in student achievement, the comparisons between the Study Central sample and nonparticipants should be treated with caution. Most importantly, students who participated in Study Central and its sponsored workshops did so voluntarily or because their instructors offered extra credit to attend; these students may be more motivated to succeed academically than other students and may differ in other ways as well. The higher course success rates for the Study Central sample could be the result of unmeasured differences between those who chose to come to Study Central and those who did not.

The use of data by the Study Central coordinators contributed to changes in how Study Central operates and is staffed and also provides an empirical basis for advocating that Study Central could be a vehicle for improving student success. Although the Study Central comparisons in Table 3.3 have limitations, the Study Central coordinators were nonetheless able to use these data to make the case to senior administrators to institutionalize the program.

## **The Future of Study Central**

After three years in the cafeteria, Study Central moved in spring 2009 to a newly renovated location. With the support of top-level administrators, this new location was designed exclusively for Study Central and its related components. And as funding from the SSPIRE

**Student Support Partnership Integrating Resources and Education**

**Table 3.3**

**Outcomes for a Sample of Developmental-Level Students in Study Central,  
Compared with All Students Who Attempted the Same Developmental Classes  
(Academic Year 2007-2008)<sup>a</sup>**

Indicator	Study Central Sample	<i>Number of students sampled</i>	Comparison Group	<i>Number of students</i>
Course success rate (%)				
Developmental English (basic writing)	77.8	78	53.8	850
Developmental math (pre-algebra)	56.4	89	46.6	1,371
Persistence to next term <sup>b</sup> (%)				
Fall 2007 to Spring 2008	100.0	68	72.6	1,054

SOURCE: Cal-PASS.

NOTES: <sup>a</sup>This table compares outcomes of students in the Study Central sample who attempted English 84 (Basic Writing Skills II) or Math 80 (pre-algebra) during the academic year 2007-2008, with outcomes of all students who attempted English 84 or Math 80 during that year. These courses are each one level below the first degree-applicable course in the sequence.

Limitations to this comparison include the small sample size for Study Central and an inability to control for background characteristics or motivation levels of students.

<sup>b</sup>Persistence rate is for students who attempted Math 80 or English 84 in fall 2007 only.

initiative ended, state BSI funds were secured to cover the largest direct costs of the program: the pay for faculty who staff Study Central and run the academic workshops. But with fears of impending budget cuts for community colleges, and enrollments likely to be growing, college administrators are — as of this writing — reluctant to commit to long-term funding of Study Central and, indeed, to long-term funding of many other programs on campus. In the words of one SSPIRE coordinator who expressed an understanding of this position: “Nobody’s going to commit to anything right now.” With the knowledge that it may not be possible to continue funding the program at the same levels as in the past — but a desire to continue offering these services to students — several new ideas are being considered at Merced.

First, in a move that may strengthen the connection of Study Central to other services and programs on campus, the role of coordination may be consolidated into a single, full-time position that will be responsible for several related initiatives.

Second, administrators and coordinators are considering requiring students to swipe their ID cards upon entry into Study Central, thus generating state funding based on students' hourly attendance. But this potential for funding comes with trade-offs, as the new arrangement would require more formal entry by students (who could potentially be discouraged by the requirement) and would also require stricter monitoring by the college and meeting state requirements.

Merced's administrators have also considered, but for the time being rejected, the possibility of no longer paying faculty for their time in Study Central. Instead of direct compensation, they considered allowing faculty to volunteer at Study Central as one of their required office hours. But faculty have expressed little interest in this plan, and if it were to be instituted it appears that fewer faculty would agree to dedicate the time and energy required to participate.

### **The Legacy of SSPIRE at Merced**

While the longer-term structure and funding for Study Central are uncertain, there may be other ways in which the approaches encouraged by Study Central will be sustained at the college. For example, the facility may have prompted some instructors to acquire a better understanding of the needs and problems of underrepresented students. As noted, faculty who participate in Study Central have been given the opportunity to work with students outside of the traditional classroom setting and to learn more about these students. In addition, data collected by the college have been used to better inform faculty, staff, and administrators about these students and their experiences. And as faculty work together across disciplines and across the divisions of instruction and counseling, many report a better understanding of each other and the roles they play, and thus may be in a stronger position to coordinate instruction and services at the college. Thus, in some ways, many of the program practices and principles introduced or expanded as part of SSPIRE may have already become a part of the campus culture at Merced.





## Chapter 4

# Building the Summer Math Jam and Fall Lifelines Program for Incoming Freshmen at Pasadena City College

Pasadena City College lies on the eastern edge of the city of Los Angeles and is the third-largest single-campus, community college district in the country,<sup>1</sup> with full time equivalent enrollment of approximately 15,000 students and total enrollment of approximately 27,000 students.<sup>2</sup> While Pasadena's graduation, retention, and transfer rates tend to be higher than those at many of the other SSPIRE colleges, its size and urban location means that it still enrolls significant numbers of students who have substantial barriers to success.<sup>3</sup> Some of the challenges facing faculty, staff, and administrators include managing:

- A highly diverse campus: About a third of all students are Hispanic and nearly another third are of Asian/Pacific Islander descent. Eighteen percent of students are white (see Table 5.1 below);
- High levels of financial need: Half of all students receive some form of financial aid.<sup>4</sup>
- A low level of preparedness for college: Approximately half of all students are first-generation college students, with 64 percent placing into developmental-level composition and 80 percent placing into developmental-level math.<sup>5</sup>

Well positioned to design and test solutions to many of these challenges on Pasadena's campus is the Teaching and Learning Center (TLC), a student services center committed to helping underprepared and first-generation college students move successfully from developmental to college-level courses.

Summer **Math Jam** is a two-week, intensive, voluntary math review and college orientation for new students assessed at all three levels of basic skills math. In the fall semester, students continue in **Lifelines**, a component in which students meet with their Math Jam counselor and peer tutors. semester.

<sup>1</sup>Pasadena City College Web site: <http://www.pasadena.edu/about/factsheet.cfm>

<sup>2</sup>Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2008. Data from fall 2007.

<sup>3</sup>Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2008. Data from 2006-2007 academic year.

<sup>4</sup>Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2008. Data from 2006-2007 academic year.

<sup>5</sup>The percentage of first-generation students was 47 percent in fall 2004, and the percentage of students placing in developmental-level courses refers to the 2003-2004 academic year. Both figures are reported by the Teaching and Learning Center in SSPIRE, 2005a.

The TLC’s funding comes primarily from noncampus sources, meaning that it can operate outside many of the normal political and financial structures — mandated counselor-student ratios, class size regulations, curriculum guidelines, or funding streams tied to college enrollment — that can often hinder attempts to innovate and incubate new programs designed to help struggling students. The TLC also enjoys this flexibility because it shares faculty and staff with, but is not a part of, other departmental or divisional structures on campus; instead it operates out of the Office of Academic Support.

## **An Overview of Math Jam/Lifelines**

When offered the opportunity to design a program for SSPIRE, TLC staff jumped at the chance. Staff hoped to use the SSPIRE grant to improve the poor completion rates they had observed in mathematics courses on campus: 80 percent of students entering the college were placed into basic math, with half of those earning a D, an F, or withdrawing, with even higher rates of failure among first-time students under the age of 20 and minority students).<sup>6</sup> While there were likely several reasons for this poor completion rate, faculty inquiry groups organized as part of the Strengthening Pre-collegiate Education in Community Colleges (SPECC) project had discovered that a likely culprit was a problem of “dosage.” Students needed an intensive intervention to increase their skills, as opposed to the typical three- to five-hours per-week course. The TLC therefore designed and implemented a two-part SSPIRE program to address this need.

The first and most prominent piece of Pasadena’s SSPIRE program is “Math Jam.” Designed to boost student math skills before the start of the school year, Math Jam is a two-week, not-for-credit, all-day, intensive summer math course targeted at young, minority students who place into developmental-level math courses. Starting in 2008, the TLC began an intersession “Winter Jam” to help students prepare for the spring semester. Both Jams employ a nontraditional team that employs nontraditional teaching methods. Math Jam staff include:

- *One to four math department instructors*, also considered TLC staff because of their role in SSPIRE and other TLC math-related projects. For Math Jam, they design a fun, yet rigorous math curriculum for developmental-level students, present these concepts and ideas to students each day of the Math Jam course, and coordinate the efforts of the tutor/mentors who work with students in breakout sessions and after class.
- *Ten to twelve tutor/mentors*, who serve as supplemental instructors: sitting with students during Math Jam lectures, leading students in small sections

---

<sup>6</sup>SSPIRE, 2005a. Based on 2003-2004 academic year data.

throughout the day, and providing tutoring and mentoring outside of class. The students who fill this role have typically participated in TLC programs in the past and often come from the same socio-economic background and have faced many of the same challenges as current Math Jam students. Because Math Jam students view their tutor/mentors as peers, they often connect with them in more direct and personal ways than with faculty and staff.

- *The TLC counselor* provides counseling to Math Jam as well as other TLC program students during the hours she spends in the TLC counseling office (approximately half of her time). Her services include running special sessions on study skills and test anxiety, assisting students with course advising, helping students outline their academic plans, and providing limited professional counseling services. Because the counselor works for the TLC, she is familiar with challenges faced by the developmental-level students targeted by Math Jam as well as the particular stresses and life situations these students confront. Currently, the availability of this counselor to work specifically with Math Jam students during the summer is more limited than managers would like it to be, but the TLC is trying to expand her role in the summer session. The counselor is able to spend more time in the second component of Pasadena's SSPIRE program, known as Lifelines.

Lifelines provides continued academic support, student services, and personalized attention to Math Jam students as they enroll in math courses during the school year. TLC tutor/mentors, many of whom served as supplemental instructors during Math Jam, continue to work with Lifelines students according to the terms specified in a "contract" signed by the student and the TLC. Tutor/mentors provide tutoring in math (and sometimes other courses) at specified points throughout the semester, mentor students on campus and life issues, and follow up aggressively when students miss scheduled appointments. Tutor/mentors also encourage students to take advantage of the other services the TLC has to offer, such as dedicated counseling hours, a computer lab, and workshops designed to support student learning. Finally, starting in 2007, the TLC added a series of evening study jams to the Lifelines program to give students additional opportunities to prepare for exams throughout the semester.

## **Math Jam/Lifelines in Operation**

With Math Jam/Lifelines, the coordinators hope to better address student needs by modifying classes — and expectations of what classes can do — and by connecting students with services that they might not otherwise readily access. To accomplish this goal, the TLC employed three main strategies: designing a program that was conducive to student needs and that filled a gap in what the college had to offer, developing an appealing curriculum that helped

students learn math, and assembling a nontraditional team of people able to assist the students with their college experience. The balance of this section focuses on how Math Jam/Lifelines and its strategies were implemented, the costs associated with this implementation plan, and how students and faculty responded to its innovations.

### **Math Jam/Lifelines Fills a Need on Campus**

Creating Math Jam was a risky proposition. One might not expect students to attend a math course with significant time and work demands that offered no credit in return. An all-day program over two weeks of the summer cuts into a student's ability to earn money to pay for college courses in which he or she will enroll in the fall. It can also be intimidating; math is not an easy subject, and the target group for the course is students who have placed primarily into developmental-level math. Somewhat surprisingly, then, the TLC was able to exceed its recruitment target of 60 students for the first year of Math Jam, with 72 students starting the program in summer 2006.

This initial success likely had to do, in part, with early recruitment efforts. TLC staff, for instance, published an article about Math Jam in the college's community newsletter, which prompted phone calls from students and parents of students interested in the program. The TLC counselor also worked intensively on recruitment, encouraging counselors who ran placement exams to refer to the program those students who placed into developmental-level math courses and cooperating informally with campus organizations, such as Ujima and Puente, which have programs with dedicated counseling and other services for African-American and Hispanic students, respectively.

By the second year, other programs whose students had poor math completion rates at Pasadena began to more strongly encourage or require their students to participate in the Math Jam/Lifelines program. These organizations include Ujima and Puente, which had partnered with the TLC in a more official capacity since the first summer, as well as the Physical Education department, which has an interest in ensuring that student athletes get academic support. During summer 2007, 137 students entered Math Jam, exceeding the target size of 100. These figures indicate a real demand for such a course on campus.

The data in Table 4.1 show that the students participating in the summer Math Jam program in its first two years resemble what one might expect, given how the TLC targeted first-generation, minority students, and students who placed into developmental-level math courses. A greater percentage of African-American and Hispanic students enrolled in Math Jam than enrolled in the college as a whole. The students who enrolled in Math Jam also tended to be younger than the general student body. The greater percentage of men enrolled in the program than in the college in general may reflect the inclusion of student athletes. While the TLC didn't

**Student Support Partnership Integrating Resources and Education**

**Table 4.1**

**Demographic Characteristics of Math Jam Participants,  
Compared with All Pasadena City College Students  
(Academic Years 2006-2007 and 2007-2008)**

Characteristic	Math Jam Students	All Students
Gender <sup>a</sup> (%)		
Female	42.3	55.5
Male	57.7	44.5
Race/ethnicity (%)		
African-American	28.8	6.1
Asian	3.5	27.6
Hispanic	47.7	33.4
White	5.3	17.7
Other <sup>b</sup>	14.7	15.3
Age (%)		
19 years old or under	51.8	41.8
20 - 24 years old	7.7	22.7
25 years old or over	5.3	35.6
Unknown	35.3	NA
<b>Total students<sup>c</sup></b>	<b>170<sup>d</sup></b>	<b>66,681</b>

SOURCE: Cal-PASS.

NOTES: <sup>a</sup>Excludes “unknown” for gender.

<sup>b</sup>Other includes Filipino, Pacific Islander, Native American, Other, and Uncollected.

<sup>c</sup>Total students reflects the headcount, not the FTES (full-time equivalent student) count.

<sup>d</sup>209 students participated in Math Jam in the summers of 2006 and 2007, but demographic data are available in Cal-PASS only for the 170 students who formally enrolled at Pasadena at any point in academic years 2006-2007 or 2007-2008.

specifically target men, the typically poor performance of male minority students in developmental-level math courses certainly makes their higher than expected involvement in this program a desirable outcome.<sup>7</sup>

### **Staff Developed a Substantive and Appealing Curriculum**

The designers of Math Jam wanted the curriculum to be fun as well as educational. A good example is the “Michael Jordan” exercise, in which students are first presented with the concept of proportionality in a lecture and then asked to work in sections with their classmates and tutor/mentors to design a basketball that fits their hand with the same circumference-to-hand span ratio that a standard basketball has to Michael Jordan’s hand. This exercise teaches important mathematical concepts that students will need to succeed in their math courses, yet places these concepts in a framework that is both familiar and fun. Furthermore, the team-based approach provides students with the support of their classmates, the excitement of working with a team, and the motivation of competing with other teams.

Students appear to find Math Jam’s approach engaging. One staff member commented, “We were just astounded by the number of students who responded well and said ‘math is fun,’ and that ‘I’m learning something.’” Also, despite the degree of anxiety about being unprepared for math that students expressed, the appeal of this curriculum might explain why so many continued to attend Math Jam once they enrolled. More importantly, evidence suggests that Math Jam is improving students’ math skills. During the first year of Math Jam, 56 percent were reassessed into a higher-level math class than the one in which they placed before they took Math Jam. This outcome is noteworthy, since it demonstrates how such a course can improve students’ math skills, even if the benefits aren’t as deep as they may first appear. Many of the students who subsequently enrolled in those higher-level math classes didn’t succeed in them (see the section on data below for further detail).

### **The Use of a Nontraditional Team Proved Valuable**

Students and staff feel that the instructor/tutor/counselor team that designs and operates the Math Jam/Lifelines program promotes a sense of community among students and gives them the confidence and skills needed to better navigate their educational careers. The Math Jam instructors, for instance, model relationships that students will encounter once they enroll in math and other classes during the school year. Some students come to Math Jam with fears about interacting with instructors. Positive interactions with Math Jam instructors, who are some of the first faces that students see when they come to college, help students understand that instructors are approachable and want them to ask questions. During the semester, Lifelines

---

<sup>7</sup>EdSource, 2008.

staff also encourage students to approach their other instructors for help or to ask for special arrangements when faced with personal difficulties.

Tutor/mentors describe their relationships with students as extending beyond tutoring and supplemental instruction to informal advising, general college guidance, and supporting the students in their college lives. Even though, as discussed above, many students do increase their comfort levels with instructors, the tutor/mentors are more approachable than instructors and other staff because they are students themselves and are usually of similar socio-economic and racial backgrounds; tutor/mentors are familiar with the types of life issues that Math Jam/Lifeline students face. At times, tutor/mentors also serve as conduits between students and formal counselors, advisers, and instructors.

Having a dedicated counselor available to help students with academic and career planning is perceived as valuable, especially when the counselor-to-student ratios on California campuses can sometimes be as high as 1,900 to 1.<sup>8</sup> One staff member noted how the TLC counselor helps students with advising and counseling issues by “getting to the source of the problem, what is impeding them from focusing completely on their work,” and by effectively working with tutor/mentors and instructional staff to make them more aware of the type and extent of the issues that students face. As noted, the counselor is most active during Lifelines, and the TLC is exploring ways to increase her role in Math Jam, most likely by providing her with additional opportunities during the summer session to teach study skills and give students general orientations to college.

Not surprisingly, the biggest cost of the program is staff compensation. Salaries for the tutor/mentors are the largest cost, followed closely by the expense of planning and coordinating the management, operation, and growth of the program. Planning and coordinating includes: planning and program design; budget monitoring; maintaining and building relationships with academic departments (such as math and physical education) and student organizations (for example, Ujima and Puente); compiling, assessing, and responding to program data; disseminating program results; and fundraising and planning ways to sustain the Math Jam/Lifelines program over the long term. Finally, included under staff costs are the salary for the TLC counselor and the planning stipends that pay staff for their Math Jam and study jam planning and instruction time.

Another important cost of Math Jam is materials. With Math Jam’s flexible and short-term approach, instructors are able to produce most of the materials themselves at little or no cost by using handouts and simply having students take notes. As students transition to their math courses and the Lifelines program, however, the cost of required textbooks can be a

---

<sup>8</sup>Woodlief, Thomas, and Orozco, 2003.

significant barrier to progress. As Table 4.2 illustrates, TLC staff offset this cost by purchasing math textbooks, which Lifelines students may borrow through a library book loan program. Students and staff say that having these books paid for and available is a big incentive to participating in the Math Jam/Lifelines program.

### **How did Pasadena City College Use Data to Understand and Strengthen Math Jam/Lifelines?**

TLC has a long history of collecting and analyzing data on the students who participate in its programs; thus, using data to understand and strengthen Math Jam/Lifelines was an essential aspect of SSPIRE activities at Pasadena. In fact, the TLC enhanced its own database of students it serves by contracting with the Claremont Graduate School of Education to build a student-record database for ongoing research and formative assessment. This enhanced database includes student demographics, course enrollments, and course grades, in addition to information about the TLC programs in which students participate.

The TLC regularly uses its data formatively to answer critical questions about Math Jam. For example, the staff wanted to know if students who participated in summer Math Jam were making the transition to Lifelines in the fall. After reviewing the data, which indicated that less than half of Math Jam participants participated in Fall Lifelines, TLC staff determined that Lifelines was a weak link in the program. Staff subsequently revised the Fall Lifelines contract to specify that participants meet more often with their tutor/mentors and do so at specific times throughout the semester. In addition, tutor/mentors are now more proactive in contacting students than in the past — calling students who do not follow through with prescribed meetings. TLC staff also increased the number of informal evening study jams throughout the school year and had math instructors reach out more aggressively to students to ensure that they knew about and took part in the study jams.

A second critical question TLC staff sought to answer was how Pasadena students interact with faculty — especially in developmental math settings. Feedback from Math Jam participants suggested that the informal and “fun” structure of Math Jam facilitated student-faculty interaction. During Math Jam, students were comfortable approaching the instructor and tutors to seek help. Moreover, the flexibility of the Math Jam curriculum allowed instructors to spend more or less time on different math competencies, as warranted by the kinds of help and instruction students seemed to need.

This feedback was particularly interesting in context of data from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) and the Community College Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (CCFSSE), which suggested that Pasadena students, in general, were less likely than the full national sample of students covered by the survey to interact with faculty. For example, 50 percent of Pasadena students report never discussing ideas from readings or



**Student Support Partnership Integrating Resources and Education**

**Table 4.2**

**Costs of Pasadena City College's Math Jam/Lifelines  
(Academic Year 2007-2008)<sup>a</sup>**

Major Program Element	Cost <sup>b</sup>	Comments
Tutor/mentors	\$37,500	10-12 students working 60 hours for Math Jam and 8-10 students working 150 hours each for Lifelines.
Program planning and coordination	\$36,600	33% FTE <sup>c</sup>
Instruction and planning stipends <sup>d</sup>	\$25,900	Stipends to cover curriculum planning and instruction for up to 5 instructors for summer and winter Jam sessions.
Counseling	\$11,500	20% FTE
Math course books	\$7,300	Math books purchased and donated to Pasadena Library, reserved for Lifelines students.
<b>Total cost of major program elements</b>	<b>\$118,800</b>	
<b>Additional significant costs<sup>e</sup></b>		Administrative oversight; clerical support; overhead; benefits

SOURCES: College's expenditure reports to MDRC; interviews with college staff.

NOTES: <sup>a</sup>Costs are reported for a single academic year during which the program was fully implemented. Funding for the program came from the SSPIRE grant and a combination of institutional funds, in-kind contributions, and coordination with other grants.

<sup>b</sup>Costs are rounded to the nearest \$100.

<sup>c</sup>Full-Time Equivalent Employment.

<sup>d</sup>Faculty hours included on this table do not generate FTES (full-time equivalent student) funding for the college.

<sup>e</sup>Elements included in "Additional significant costs" supported program operations but are difficult to quantify precisely.

courses with instructors outside of class, and only about one-third of Pasadena students discussed grades or assignments with instructors often or very often. These data prompted the TLC to host a faculty workshop to discuss the CCSSE and CCFSSSE results with a particular focus on the student-faculty interaction benchmark. About a dozen math faculty participated in the workshop, discussing such issues as how and why faculty and students have different perceptions of student-faculty interactions. The 2009 administration of the CCSSE survey will give Pasadena an opportunity to assess whether the campus-wide faculty and/or student behaviors have changed since 2007.

A third critical question TLC staff sought to answer was whether Math Jam/Lifelines students were persisting at Pasadena and showing success in the developmental math classes they attempted. The TLC began exploring the answer to these questions using their own data and found some encouraging results. For instance, 59 of 72 summer 2006 Math Jam students enrolled in fall 2006, and 106 of 137 summer 2007 Math Jam students enrolled in fall 2007. MDRC also worked with data from Cal-PASS to more closely analyze the course success rates and persistence rates of Math Jam students and shared those results with Pasadena.

As Table 4.3 shows, Math Jam students who attempted developmental math courses in the fall term directly following Math Jam did not perform particularly well in these courses:

- 28 percent of summer 2006 Math Jam students who attempted pre-algebra, elementary algebra, or intermediate algebra in fall 2006 passed the course, compared with 49 percent of all students who attempted these courses.
- 31 percent of summer 2007 Math Jam students who attempted pre-algebra, elementary algebra, or intermediate algebra in fall 2007 passed the course, compared with 46 percent of all students who attempted these courses.

At the same time, these Math Jam students who attempted developmental math courses in the fall term directly following Math Jam demonstrated more positive results when it came to persistence:

- 87 percent persisted from fall 2006 to spring 2007, compared with 79 percent of all students enrolled in developmental math courses.
- 79 percent persisted from fall 2006 to fall 2007, compared with 71 percent of all students enrolled in developmental math courses.
- 62 percent persisted from fall 2007 to spring 2008, compared with 78 percent of all students enrolled in developmental math courses.

When seeking to understand these conflicting data, TLC staff hypothesized a number of reasons as to why Math Jam students might have experienced lower success rates than their peers. One possible explanation is that during the first year of the program, Math Jam students were encouraged by TLC staff to retake placement exams before enrolling in a fall math course, a nontraditional practice at Pasadena. According to the TLC, 56 percent of the first cohort of Math Jam students skipped one level of math after retaking the math placement test — and

**Student Support Partnership Integrating Resources and Education**

**Table 4.3**

**Outcomes for Students in Pasadena City College's Math Jam Who  
Enrolled in Developmental Math Courses,  
Compared with All Students Who Enrolled in Developmental Math Courses,  
By Semester of Enrollment<sup>a</sup>**

Indicator	Math Jam	<i>Number of students<sup>b</sup></i>	Comparison Group	<i>Number of students</i>
Course success rate (%)				
Fall 2006	28.2	38	49.1	3,430
Fall 2007	30.6	60	46.1	3,347
Persistence to next term (%)				
Fall 2006	86.8	38	78.5	3,430
Fall 2007	61.7	60	77.9	3,347
Persistence to next year (%)				
Fall 2006	79.0	38	71.0	3,430
Fall 2007	NA	60	NA	3,347

SOURCE: Cal-PASS.

NOTES: <sup>a</sup>This table compares outcomes of students who attempted developmental math in the stated semester after completing the summer Math Jam with outcomes of all students who attempted developmental math in the stated semester. Developmental Math courses are pre-algebra, elementary algebra, and intermediate algebra.

Limitations to this comparison include the small sample size for Math Jam and an inability to control for background characteristics or motivation levels of students.

<sup>b</sup>Of the 72 Math Jam participants in summer 2006, 59 students enrolled in fall 2006 and 38 attempted a developmental math course. Of the 137 Math Jam participants in summer 2007, 106 enrolled in fall 2007 and 60 attempted a developmental math course.

many of these students failed their math courses. Based on these data, the TLC concluded that skipping one level of math did not seem to be conducive to math success for their students and chose to end the practice of allowing Math Jam students to retake the placement test.

Another possible reason for the lower success rates is that students participating in Math Jam may face even greater barriers than other students enrolling in developmental-level math courses. The TLC specifically targets some of the hardest-to-serve students at Pasadena, such as first-generation students who often have language barriers, as well as student athletes and the

students recruited by Ujima and Puente. In fact, TLC data show that 74 percent of summer 2007 Math Jam students were represented by these latter three groups.

A third possible reason for the lower success rates that must be considered is that the program was simply not effective. However, feedback from faculty and students — combined with observations of the program by MDRC staff — suggest otherwise. Furthermore, the fact that one cohort of Math Jam students persisted at a higher rate than their peers suggests that the student support and level of engagement enabled by the program may have had a positive influence for the students, inspiring them to stay enrolled despite poor performance in a math class. In the end, answering this question about the program's effect on students served by Math Jam would require a more rigorous research design that ensures that the program and comparison groups are similar in all respects, including unmeasured characteristics such as motivation. Only a random assignment design or a carefully controlled quasi-experimental approach can do this convincingly, offering reliable evidence on the value added of a program over and above what students would achieve on their own.

The combination of longitudinal data, CCSSE data, and internal surveys and focus groups of Math Jam students provides the TLC with diverse types of information that it can use formatively to strengthen its programs. The TLC used these available data to change how Math Jam and Fall Lifelines were structured. The TLC also used these data as a basis for internal discussions and discussions with campus leaders on how Math Jam could be adapted to other programs and students in order to help students succeed at the college. Ideally, they might be able to pursue a more rigorous summative analysis in the future in order to produce conclusive data about whether the program is effective.

## **The Future of Math Jam/Lifelines**

As noted, the TLC functions as something of an entrepreneur at Pasadena, innovating and incubating new programs geared toward the success of traditionally underserved and underprepared students. Ironically, the center's very position on campus that allows it to be creative and flexible may hinder the sustainability of its programs, since traditional departments and divisions on campus don't necessarily have a stake in these programs from the start. Interviews with faculty and staff at Pasadena reveal a limited, although growing, awareness that math is being taught in the TLC. Interviews also suggested that some faculty may conclude that rather than making special efforts to work with TLC's target group of students and to adopt its methodologies, they should continue to let the TLC handle these students and take the lead in using special methods to work with them.

Also, because TLC project funding usually comes with an end date and because SSPIRE funding ceased at the end of 2008, TLC staff have been marketing Math Jam/Lifelines

to other departments and programs on campus, with the aim of institutionalizing the program on the Pasadena campus. So far, the TLC has been successful in finding new funding. During the second year of the program, for instance, TLC staff secured a grant through Pasadena's Accountability Reporting for Community College funds, which they are using to pay for tutor/mentor salaries for several years to come. While the grant does not provide a permanent source of funding, it gives the TLC more time to seek out other sources of short- or long-term support. TLC staff also hope to cooperate more closely with staff from Ujima, Puente, the physical education department, and the math department, to see if they might be willing to pay for parts of the program, since many of their students participate in Math Jam/Lifelines.

Finally, TLC staff are considering at least three ways to make the program more financially self-sufficient by tracking enrollment and thus generating revenue for the college. One option would be turning Math Jam into a lab course; students would enroll in it like a normal credit-bearing class. To do so would require math department buy-in and might make it less appealing to students, who seem to appreciate the no-credit/no-pressure environment of Math Jam. A second approach would be to turn Math Jam into a low-credit counseling course, much like a study skills or orientation course. This option would give the course a different atmosphere than a typical math course, but the same kinds of challenges may remain: in this case, the necessity of buy-in from the counseling department and, again, possible resistance from students who don't want a formal, credit-bearing course. A third option would be to treat Math Jam like a student support center or lab on campus. Attending students would check in by swiping their ID cards as they do in many of the labs on campus, generating enrollment revenue for the college. Acquiring campus approval for this change, however, could be challenging, given the requirements surrounding such a process. While each of the above strategies is a bit unusual, they are the kinds of creative approaches that may keep Math Jam/Lifelines going for the long term.

### **The Legacy of SSPIRE at Pasadena**

In addition to developing ways to financially sustain Math Jam/Lifelines, TLC staff have sought to bring about a shift in thinking about developmental learning and nontraditional approaches to teaching at Pasadena. To that end, they have begun to integrate the ideas and practices from SSPIRE into the structure of other TLC programs, and the math department is beginning to consider ways to run a nontraditional course such as Math Jam, something it reportedly would not have considered just a few years ago. TLC staff are working with math department faculty to help them explore new types of math courses, infused with supplemental instructors and a team-teaching environment. These new courses may benefit not only Lifelines students, but also other developmental-level students across the campus.



## Chapter 5

# Using a Case Management Approach to Enhance Student Services for Underserved Students at Taft and Victor Valley Colleges

Of the nine SSPIRE colleges, Taft College and Victor Valley College are among the smallest and most remote. While the students who attend these institutions may be no worse off financially than the students who attend the other seven SSPIRE colleges, they do face challenges more typically associated with rural locations. Students, for example, must often travel significant distances to attend classes, since these two colleges are the only institutions in the immediate geographic area, and both colleges face rapidly growing populations with an increasing demand for higher education. Both institutions also serve large and increasing minority student populations with particularly poor English and math skills,<sup>1</sup> which poses a particular challenge, given that minority students tend to do worse in developmental-level courses than white students.<sup>2</sup>

### An Overview of the SSPIRE Programs at Taft and Victor Valley

When designing their SSPIRE programs, both Taft and Victor Valley sought to develop ways to assist some of their most struggling and often underserved student populations. The SSPIRE program at Taft, for instance, targets Hispanic students, especially the growing number of students from migrant families. At the start of SSPIRE, many Taft faculty and staff were only just beginning to recognize the challenges migrant students face, including: language barriers, a lack of reliable transportation, and a commitment to family that makes it difficult to stay enrolled when it comes time for their families to move. The SSPIRE program at Victor Valley targets any student placing into pre-collegiate or developmental-level English or math classes according to the college's assessment

**Taft College's** SSPIRE program includes a dedicated adviser and enhanced support services for migrant students through the Center for Academic Support and Assistance (CASA) office.

**Victor Valley College's** SSPIRE program includes a dedicated counselor for students in select developmental-level math and English courses and a learning community. Students are provided with intensive counseling, tutoring, and book vouchers.

<sup>1</sup>SSPIRE, 2005b; SSPIRE, 2005c.

<sup>2</sup>EdSource, 2008.

exams, a population which is particularly at risk of not reaching their goals. Victor Valley's own data show, for instance, that no demographic group was able to pass these developmental-level courses at a rate that exceeded 50 percent, with the exception of Asian-American students. African-American, American Indian, and Hispanic students performed particularly poorly. Compared with the campus average of 60 percent for all classes, this is quite low.

Rather than develop completely new programs to serve their targeted groups of students, both Taft and Victor Valley gravitated toward a case management approach. An individual counselor at Victor Valley and a small advising/counseling team at Taft ensure that targeted students enroll in certain academic courses and receive support services designed to help them succeed in college. At both colleges, the SSPIRE case management staff are under the umbrella of the student services division on campus but operate somewhat separately from other student services staff, since their responsibilities are fairly different. They work with fewer students — caseloads are less than 200 students, compared with the normal caseload of 1,000 students or more — and more intensively. Staff follow their SSPIRE students' work more closely than they would a non-SSPIRE student, coordinate with everyone else working with these students, and try to provide a range of services that are responsive to students' educational and cultural needs.

While the case management teams remain the core of the SSPIRE program at both colleges, SSPIRE often overlaps with other academic programs and student services on campus, sometimes making it challenging to tell where SSPIRE ends and these other programs begin (see Table 5.1 for a listing of key SSPIRE program elements). At Taft, for instance, the SSPIRE program supplements the work of two other programs: the college-funded Migrant Student Services Program and the federal, Title V-funded English as a Second Language/Basic skills learning communities program.<sup>3</sup> One of the major contributions of the SSPIRE grant at Taft was to pay for a bilingual adviser and program assistant. More recently, the grant paid for the Summer Bridge program, designed to orient Hispanic students to the Taft campus during the summer before their first fall semester at Taft.

The bilingual adviser and program assistant work out of the Center for Academic Support and Assistance (CASA), a center created by SSPIRE. CASA is also the main entry point for students into many of the programs and services listed in Table 5.1, with students being referred to CASA by instructors, other advisers, or fellow students. Students come to CASA to receive academic advising and help on everything from filling out forms for financial assistance

---

<sup>3</sup>Both Taft and Victor Valley have incorporated learning communities into their SSPIRE programs. Unlike the learning communities discussed in Chapter 2, which form the core of the SSPIRE programs at the five SSPIRE colleges discussed in that chapter, Taft and Victor Valley's learning communities are not as central to their SSPIRE program. The learning communities at these two colleges are one of many services included in a "package" and are offered to some, but not all, students in the SSPIRE program.



**Student Support Partnership Integrating Resources and Education**

**Table 5.1**

**Key Elements of Taft College’s and Victor Valley College’s SSPIRE Programs**

	Taft	Victor Valley
SSPIRE team	Director of Migrant Student Services program/SSPIRE Program Coordinator; Bilingual Advisor; Program Assistant	Counselor/SSPIRE Program Coordinator/Learning Community Counseling Course instructor
Target group of students	Hispanic students, primarily those from migrant families, and typically those in degree/credential-seeking programs	Students who place into developmental-level English or math courses, with a preference for minority students
Academic programs and student services in which students may participate	Migrant Student Services program English as a Second Language/Basic skills learning communities Summer Bridge Bilingual academic advising and career counseling Support in accessing service programs and financial aid Tutoring, especially in English skills Field trips, including college visits Transportation vouchers	Dedicated learning communities linking developmental math or English with a counseling course Study Skills courses Intensive academic advising and counseling services Required tutoring hours Required hours in Writing Center/Math Lab Study groups run by SSPIRE faculty Field trips, including college visits Book vouchers

SOURCE: MDRC field research.

to getting enrolled in tutoring programs. CASA also provides a more relaxed environment for the students in the SSPIRE program to seek out help from each other informally, as well as to eat, study, and use the computers. CASA is often perceived as the campus hub of services for students from migrant backgrounds.

At Victor Valley, the core of the SSPIRE program is the counselor who closely coordinates student enrollment and participation in developmental-level English and math courses. Initially, SSPIRE students were enrolled in “SSPIRE-identified” classes, even though non-SSPIRE students could enroll in these same classes. Later, Victor Valley was able to reserve sections exclusively for SSPIRE students. SSPIRE English students were originally enrolled in a coordinated curriculum for developmental students that had been created by English depart-

ment faculty before SSPIRE began. Beginning in spring 2008, however, students started enrolling into math and English learning communities, with developmental-level courses linked to a counseling/student success course taught by the SSPIRE counselor.

Another key component of the Victor Valley SSPIRE program is a student success contract that students complete when they enter the program. The contract spells out services students should participate in as part of the SSPIRE program and specifies activities, such as the number of counseling visits and tutoring/lab visits students should complete during each semester. As an incentive, students are offered a book voucher/reimbursement for completing their contracts. Another incentive is that the SSPIRE counselor works with SSPIRE students to help them find slots in high-demand (and therefore hard-to-enroll-in) classes. Throughout the year, the SSPIRE counselor closely monitors each student's progress in fulfilling the contract, intervening as needed with encouragement and support.

## **Taft and Victor Valley's Case Management Programs in Operation**

While the details of Taft and Victor Valley's SSPIRE programs vary, the programs share a number of key implementation challenges, including the need to find and recruit students, build a sense of community, grapple with the costs associated with case management programs, and address weaknesses associated with the case management designs. The remainder of this section discusses some of the operational realities of these two SSPIRE programs.

### **Identifying and Recruiting Students**

One important role of the case management staff at both colleges is identifying and recruiting the targeted students. The process is a combination of locating these students through placement and enrollment records at each college and coordinating with various faculty and staff to identify students who might have otherwise been missed. At Taft, for instance, the coordinator of the Migrant Student Services Program (who is also the SSPIRE program coordinator), along with the lead instructor of the Title V-funded learning communities program, refers students to CASA. At the same time, the SSPIRE adviser and program assistant reach out to advising staff and students already enrolled in the program to help identify other eligible students. At Victor Valley, the SSPIRE counselor reviews placement scores, communicates with math and English instructors, and in some cases simply walks up and down the lines while students are registering for classes to identify and enroll eligible students.

As can be seen in Table 5.2, both Taft and Victor Valley's SSPIRE programs served only a moderate number of students, as might be expected, given the types of students being

**Student Support Partnership Integrating Resources and Education**

**Table 5.2**

**Demographic Characteristics of SSPIRE Participants  
at Taft College and Victor Valley College,  
Compared with All Students  
(Academic Years 2006-2007 and 2007-2008)**

Characteristic	Taft		Victor Valley	
	SSPIRE	All Students	SSPIRE	All Students
Gender <sup>a</sup> (%)				
Female	53.0	19.1	75.0	58.7
Male	47.0	80.9	25.0	41.4
Race/ethnicity (%)				
African-American	0.7	8.0	28.7	12.3
Asian	0.0	1.3	1.9	2.6
Hispanic	95.4	48.2	32.5	31.5
White	0.7	37.1	30.6	45.0
Other <sup>b</sup>	3.3	5.5	6.4	8.6
Age (%)				
19 years old or under	35.1	13.6	32.8	40.7
20 - 24 years old	21.2	21.4	18.3	17.0
25 years old or over	40.4	65.1	47.8	42.3
Unknown	3.3	NA	1.1	NA
Total students <sup>c</sup>	151	40,937	268	27,983

SOURCE: Cal-PASS.

NOTES: <sup>a</sup>Excludes “unknown” for gender.

<sup>b</sup>Other includes Filipino, Pacific Islander, Native American, Other, and Uncollected.

<sup>c</sup>Total students reflects the headcount, not the FTES (full-time equivalent student) count.

targeted and the intensive, case management focus of these programs. At Taft, SSPIRE students are almost entirely Hispanic and younger than other students enrolled at the college.<sup>4</sup> At Victor Valley, SSPIRE students tend to be predominantly women and students of color — either African-American or Hispanic — as well as somewhat older than students on average.

### **Creating a Sense of Community and Student Commitment to SSPIRE Activities**

In addition to connecting students with various academic programs and student services, SSPIRE staff at Taft and Victor Valley attempt to create an environment that allows faculty and staff to work with students and that allows students to connect with one another in a nontraditional learning environment. One way that both programs do this is through the use of learning communities (though, as noted, the Victor Valley learning community has been operating only since fall 2008, and only some SSPIRE students at both colleges participate in learning communities). The SSPIRE students at Taft who participate in the Title V-funded ESL and Basic Skills learning communities share a majority of their classes with one another and see many of the same fellow students throughout the day. In the Victor Valley learning community, the students take multiple classes with one another and know that their English and math instructors and SSPIRE counselor are working together to coordinate their lessons.

Both colleges also provide a sense of community through the program. At Victor Valley, for instance, students self-identify as SSPIRE students largely because they sign the student success contract and know that a particular counselor is closely monitoring their progress. Students to whom MDRC spoke reported that they appreciate the motivation the contract provides them. In many cases, they know that the services specified in the contract might be good for them, but they need the push to participate that the SSPIRE program provides. Being part of this program may help give them the confidence they need to succeed in college. Of course, the incentives Victor Valley has created for meeting contract goals — namely, book vouchers, guaranteed slots in high-demand classes, and more attention from a counselor than a student typically would receive — certainly make the program all the more attractive.

One of the key strategies used to create a sense of community for Taft's SSPIRE students is offering them the physical space that CASA provides. SSPIRE students have a room to socialize with one another, learn from other students, and interact with staff in a less formal environment than they might encounter in a typical advising office on campus. SSPIRE staff have also helped to supplement faculty-student interaction within the Title V-funded learning

---

<sup>4</sup>While Taft's SSPIRE program is populated by a substantially higher percentage of female students than are enrolled in the college as a whole (53 percent compared with only 19 percent), Integrated Postsecondary Education System (IPEDS) data for academic year 2006-2007 show that 60 percent of degree/certificate-seeking students — the type of students SSPIRE typically serves — were women.

communities program by holding weekly meetings between faculty, staff, and students, in which students, staff, and faculty give feedback to one another and discuss ways in which the learning community courses might work better.

### **Managing the Costs of Case Management**

One drawback to the case management approach adopted by Taft and Victor Valley is that it can be more expensive than traditional counseling and advising. As Table 5.3 illustrates, the counselors at Victor Valley or the Adviser/Program Coordinator team at Taft consume a significant portion of the cost of SSPIRE on those campuses. While the absolute salary cost for these particular positions may not be any more than it would be at most other community colleges, the cost per student for the services delivered is significantly higher. As noted earlier, the caseload for these staff is fewer than 200 students, which is far less than a typical adviser or counselor caseload. While the case management approach to advising/counseling in these two SSPIRE programs may be more intense and higher quality than what is delivered in a typical advising/counseling program and may be what is required to help these high-risk students succeed, the cost is substantial and could prove difficult for these colleges to sustain at this scale.

Another major cost element illustrated in Table 5.3 is the cost of planning and coordinating a case management program like the SSPIRE programs at Taft and Victor Valley. This work includes such tasks as managing the budget, collecting and examining data, and coordinating and arranging student access to services across campus with different departments and programs. Coordination also includes building the program and influencing other existing programs on campus to make changes that benefit students. For example, the counselor/coordinator at Victor Valley spent considerable hours working with the English faculty to better accommodate the needs of SSPIRE students, eventually leading to the creation of a learning community exclusively for SSPIRE students.

The final element listed in Table 5.3 is the cost of providing textbooks. As noted, Victor Valley used textbook vouchers as an incentive to motivate students to participate and to meet the obligations specified in their student contracts. Students appreciated this additional program support, but the extent of students' financial need for these vouchers and the size of any vouchers needed to assist and motivate students is still very much an open question.

### **Limitations of Taft and Victor Valley's Case Management Approach**

Although Taft and Victor Valley's case management models of delivering intensive student services may be able to assist many high-risk students on campus, as currently structured, they also have some disadvantages. First, the same staff who provide case management to students also coordinate the program. This is both time consuming and involves work that typical advising/counseling staff are not trained to do. Furthermore, at both colleges, the

**Student Support Partnership Integrating Resources and Education**

**Table 5.3**

**Costs of Taft College's and Victor Valley College's SSPIRE Programs  
(Academic Year 2007-2008)<sup>a</sup>**

Major Program Element	Taft		Victor Valley	
	Cost <sup>b</sup>	Comments	Cost	Comments
Program planning and coordination	\$32,800	60% FTE <sup>c</sup>	\$43,800	50% FTE for program counselor/coordinator; 10% FTE for dean
Counseling/advising	\$38,500	100% FTE	\$47,200	50% FTE for program counselor/coordinator; 40% FTE for additional counselor
Program Assistant	\$34,800	100% FTE	NA	
Course books		NA	\$22,200	
<b>Total cost of major program elements</b>	\$106,100		\$113,200	
<b>Additional significant costs<sup>d</sup></b>		Administrative oversight; clerical support; overhead; benefits; faculty instructional time; student field trips		Administrative oversight; clerical support; overhead; benefits; faculty instructional time; faculty training

SOURCES: College's expenditure reports to MDRC; interviews with college staff.

NOTES: <sup>a</sup>Costs are reported for a single academic year during which the program was fully implemented. Funding for the program came from the SSPIRE grant and a combination of institutional funds, in-kind contributions, and coordination with other grants.

<sup>b</sup>Costs are rounded to the nearest \$100.

<sup>c</sup>Full-Time Equivalent Employment.

<sup>d</sup>Elements included in "Additional significant costs" supported program operations but are difficult to quantify precisely.

capacity to provide the training these staff members need has been hampered by the significant turnover among top college administrators.

Another challenge is that the case management staff at both colleges often feel physically and/or professionally isolated from their advising/counseling peers. Such isolation may have some advantages; staff across campus can readily identify the program and know to whom they can send students with particular kinds of problems. However, SSPIRE may come to be seen as a kind of last-ditch stop-off point where advising and counseling staff can send students who broadly fit the profile of the students the program is designed to serve, without understand-

ing the details of the student's problems or the ways in which the program can help. Staff at Taft, for instance, discussed how other counselors and advisers frequently sent Hispanic students to the Migrant Services Program or to CASA without really understanding the details of the program.

One approach to the isolation problem is to develop ways to infuse the knowledge and experience of special program staff into the larger student services division. Taft, for instance, will likely be relocating the SSPIRE adviser and counselor into the student services building to increase the program's connections to the student services division. This move will help SSPIRE faculty and staff at Taft make stronger connections with their advising colleagues and thus inform them about the aims and capabilities of the program. It will also help SSPIRE students be less isolated.

A third possible drawback of case management programs that staff at Taft and Victor Valley raised is the concern that students may view the program as permanent help rather than as "scaffolding" that staff will ultimately remove. In other words, staff fear that students could become dependent on SSPIRE. The programs' community-building efforts, the use of contracts in Victor Valley, and the joint faculty-student meetings of the Taft Title V-funded Learning Community are all seen by program staff as antidotes to this problem, because they serve to link students with others at the college (peers, general student services staff, and non-SSPIRE faculty) who may serve as supports outside of the SSIPRE program.

## **Program Assessment and Improvement**

Neither Taft nor Victor Valley's SSPIRE programs had strong cultures of data in place at the start of SSPIRE, but during the course of the initiative, both programs have attempted to examine and evaluate the data they do have and develop practices to use data for making informed programmatic decisions. This process began in the proposal stage of the program with an early look at success rates for students similar to those who were to be targeted by SSPIRE programs. Victor Valley, for instance, noted that compared with students who were taking college-level courses, students taking developmental education courses had particularly poor success rates. The college further noted how this gap was largely driven by the particularly poor performance of Hispanic, African-American, and American Indian students in these courses. This understanding of achievement gaps was part of the motivation behind Victor Valley's particular targeting efforts.

As the colleges have progressed through SSPIRE, both Taft and Victor Valley have continued to collect and examine data on the students in their programs. Victor Valley, for instance, reports that the percentage of students passing their SSPIRE courses has, in many cases, increased over time. Similarly, Taft reports that 88 percent of students in the 2008

SSPIRE cohort completed at least three-quarters of their courses, which is substantially more than the 19 percent of students who did so in a comparison group comprised of a cohort of migrant services program students in 2004 (pre-SSPIRE).

These findings show promising trends in the achievement levels of students involved in the colleges' SSPIRE programs. As discussed in Chapter 1, however, it must be noted that without a more rigorous comparison, it is impossible to know whether these increases in student success are the result of SSPIRE or other factors. It could be that the students enrolled in SSPIRE were more motivated or had other characteristics that helped them to succeed. Instead, these data are best used to develop a sense of how students are responding to the programs and to make decisions that will improve the quality of the programs.

Using data formatively is a task with which both Taft and Victor Valley have struggled. At both colleges, the capacity of the SSPIRE programs to use data in this way has been limited by significant shifts in design since their inception and political changes on the campus as a whole, making it difficult to draw a connection between student success and any one change in policy or practice. However, there have been times when data have been used for interesting observations about the program. Taft, for example, noticed a dip in persistence rates during the second year of the program. While staff can't be certain, it is likely that this increase can be attributed, in part, to the SSPIRE counselor/program coordinator being on leave without an official replacement, suggesting that the program may be vulnerable to staffing changes or long absences.

### **The Future of SSPIRE at Taft and Victor Valley**

With the end of SSPIRE funding, SSPIRE staff have been grappling with how to adapt and/or sustain their programs in the years ahead. One challenge has been how to build a program with an influence that extends to the academic divisions and other divisions or arms of the counseling and advising departments within which these programs are housed. Over the period of the SSPIRE grant, SSPIRE staff have worked to build their relationships with staff from these other divisions or departments on campus, in the hope of finding a true champion for the SSPIRE programs within them. By all accounts, this process has been frustrating and sometimes inefficient. One way to approach such a challenge is through the support of an upper administrator who can broker meetings at the right level with staff in other departments or divisions. Both colleges were at somewhat of a disadvantage in this regard, given the large numbers of vacancies in these offices during the course of the grant.

Still, both Taft and Victor Valley have gradually adapted and learned over the years. Victor Valley, for example, was able to develop its current learning communities program in partnership with the English department, and Taft created its Summer Bridge program and CASA. The staff of both SSPIRE programs are now in a position to use the lessons they learned



to increase connections between service and instructional divisions on their campuses. Staff are also more knowledgeable about the issues confronting particular populations — Hispanic and developmental-level learners — and are better able to inform their peers about the best way to assist similar students.

Victor Valley's SSPIRE staff have taken steps to sustain parts of the existing SSPIRE program. The counselor recently became the coordinator of the college's Puente program, a statewide program designed to support academic and career achievement among Hispanic and Latino/a students through a coordinated system of academic requirements, counseling, and mentoring. When SSPIRE ends, the counselor will continue the English learning communities program, started under SSPIRE, which will now target Hispanic students. The counselor hopes to be able to continue to build on the relationships she developed with the math department; she would like to see the math department build a learning community of its own.

The learning communities that Taft developed under SSPIRE will continue in part with funding under the college's Title V-funded learning communities program. The counselor who coordinated the SSPIRE program will continue to manage the college's Migrant Student Services program, and the college has begun to cover the salaries of the SSPIRE staff. At the same time, while CASA will continue to remain open as a space for students, the adviser and program assistant are planning to move into the Student Services Center and work alongside other advisers. This move could be viewed as a loss, since CASA may cease to be the one-stop spot for migrant student issues. However, it is also an opportunity for SSPIRE staff to share with other student services staff across the college their knowledge of and expertise in working with this particular population



## Chapter 6

# Lessons and Conclusions from the SSPIRE Initiative

The preceding chapters detailed the work of the nine SSPIRE community colleges in designing and implementing their programs. This chapter draws on MDRC's three-year experience with the initiative to offer some cross-cutting observations about the implementation of SSPIRE.

The central goal of the SSPIRE initiative was to bring together instructional and student service activities that traditionally operate separately in order to better support young, low-income, and academically underprepared students. This endeavor, which required the colleges to try out new or virtually new strategies to connect these disparate spheres of activities, called on them to rethink long-established institutional practices and structures. Two key and related challenges that planning and implementing SSPIRE posed to the colleges were first, to design and launch new initiatives against the backdrop of the already hectic day-to-day demands of a large institution, and second, to make these initiatives work in the existing campus environment, while — ideally — creating a model for changes in that environment.

Although grant funds were both an important incentive and a resource for these changes, it is important to stress that they represented only a small fraction of these colleges' overall operating budgets. Even when augmented by the colleges' own funds (which to some degree happened at all of the participating colleges), SSPIRE could be expected to affect only a modest portion of each college's student population and operating environment.

Thus it is not surprising that the changes SSPIRE brought about at most colleges during its three years of operation were largely incremental and that the SSPIRE programs remain works in progress; their programmatic structures are still being refined, and their lessons and results are still emerging. Nevertheless, SSPIRE did produce new programs, new practices, and new lessons, with the potential to provide models for the colleges in future efforts to help students succeed in their coursework and remain in school.

This chapter draws on the experiences of the SSPIRE colleges to offer concluding thoughts on three topics: (1) the attributes that appear to have promoted success in implementing these SSPIRE programs; (2) the colleges' use of data to track progress and help them understand and refine their programs; and (3) the sustainability of the SSPIRE programs and the related practices the programs generated. Many of the practices discussed in this chapter, like those discussed throughout this report, can be modeled or adapted by community colleges that are seeking to develop programs and practices with similar goals.

## Lessons from Well-Implemented Programs

Each of the nine colleges started from a different place in designing its SSPIRE program, and each then followed a somewhat different path in its development. Some colleges already enjoyed greater levels of cooperation between their student services and academic divisions at the start of the initiative than did others. Some colleges had a larger number of programs on their campuses from which they could draw useful lessons or ideas. Some colleges enhanced existing programs, whereas others developed entirely new ones.

Regardless of the individual colleges' starting points, MDRC's research found that there were several practices colleges put into effect that appeared to make it more likely that they would be able to smoothly implement a program. Smooth implementation occurs when program planners succeed in running the program as it was designed; it does not necessarily imply that students' success rates will improve as a result of the program. At some colleges, these practices were embraced in a prominent way, while at others they were limited or carried out inconsistently. When these practices were clearly in effect, however, programs tended to be well planned and well implemented. When they were not, programs came together more unevenly and took longer to get off the ground.

The practices that appear to promote smooth implementation can be summed up in three lessons for colleges seeking to develop or enhance programs that share SSPIRE's goal of integrating support services with academic instruction:

- *Move quickly from the broad concept of “integrating services with instruction” to clear and concrete goals and program definitions.*

The SSPIRE colleges could choose from a variety of approaches to integrating instruction and student support; likewise, they could direct those efforts to a diverse range of potential target groups. Yet the resources available — both those the college could commit from its own budget and those from SSPIRE — were limited. Thus it was critically important to narrow the range of changes to programmatic elements that were operationally feasible and could be financially sustained, and then to clearly define and communicate these choices to the faculty, staff, and students in the programs. In addition to clearly defining their program elements, the colleges that were able to implement their programs more smoothly also clearly defined the roles of faculty and staff working in their programs.

One obvious approach to ensure the clarity of the program is to take incremental steps and build on existing programs and relationships. Three of the community colleges with existing learning community programs — Mt. SAC, De Anza, and Santa Ana — have done just that: both enriching previously existing linked courses with counseling and other support and

incorporating these elements into newly created learning communities based on the college's existing model.

But newly created programs also benefited from establishing a clear goal at the outset. Merced College, for instance, early on identified the need for a “place-based” strategy, one that could provide a supportive and also appealing site for students to work and interact more fluidly with instructors and other college staff. The college's Study Central emerged from that initial, well-focused idea. Moreover, Pasadena's program is a well-defined response to the documented challenges facing students in developmental math programs. Clear recognition of the elements of a problem prompted creation of the summer Math Jam, a program that is focused on a group of disadvantaged students and designed to address both their academic needs and their needs for student support services.

- *Secure the support of senior leadership and employ strong program leaders who can bridge the gaps between student services and academics.*

The early involvement of senior leaders at the colleges provided definite impetus to solid planning and implementation of SSPIRE initiatives. When leaders gave attention and support to the programs as they moved through planning and start-up, the result was smooth implementation. In contrast, a lack of senior-level attention — often due to the high rate of administrative turnover at many campuses — created a less supportive environment for the program and its coordinators.

Most typically, senior-level involvement in SSPIRE did not extend to college presidents — at least not beyond their early endorsements of the proposed SSPIRE changes. Instead, it was the time and commitment of vice presidents and deans that appears to have been most influential. These senior college officials can play three key roles:

First, they reinforce or maintain clarity about the program's vision and aims. The college faculty or staff who coordinated these programs were not vice presidents or deans, but the connection to senior leaders and their advice and guidance helped keep the work focused. Such high-level support was less important in colleges that were using SSPIRE to expand or modify existing programs, but still played an important role, ensuring that the new program additions or modifications fit the college's broader agenda. These senior officials could also assure that staff in the new efforts would work effectively within the existing college structures and would be accepted by staff of other existing programs.

Second, senior leaders help pull together other resources to augment the SSPIRE grant. These resources have included additional funding needed to supplement SSPIRE grant funds; physical resources (for example, a site for Study Central at Merced or dedicated classroom

space at American River); deployment of additional staff; partial defrayal of program staff expenses; or modification of current practices.

Finally, besides offering SSPIRE more immediate benefits, such as support for planning and implementation and access to resources, the ongoing involvement of senior leaders in SSPIRE has helped to create formal commitments that have increased the likelihood that the new programs will be sustained. The topic of sustainability is discussed further below.

The effect of the involvement of senior leaders can be amplified by the leadership skills of the program staff — coordinators in particular. Having a coordinator who is able to take initiative, identify resources (including appropriate senior leaders), and use them successfully considerably enhances the implementation and operation of programs such as SSPIRE and appears to help raise the chances of their being sustained over time.<sup>1</sup> As noted in earlier chapters, many of the SSPIRE colleges invested a large portion of their program funding in this essential role of coordination.

In several cases, finding the right person to fill this coordination role was difficult. Similarly, it was sometimes a challenge for the coordinators to quickly get the right faculty and staff on board and working in these new programs. The amount of time it took for faculty and staff to be hired or shift responsibilities to begin their SSPIRE work in earnest was often longer than expected, forcing many coordinators to shift expectations in line with the time required to establish a strong team to implement the program.

- *Bring instructional and student services faculty and staff together immediately and consistently: from planning and early implementation, through program operation, to program assessment and improvement.*

The two attributes of implementation success discussed above are somewhat generic: They would represent ideal practice for programs and initiatives of many kinds in complex institutional settings such as colleges. A third attribute, central to supporting the initiative's goal of integrating academic instruction and student services to benefit students, is the program's capacity to bring together instructional and student services faculty and staff in collaborative roles.

A key lesson that emerged from the SSPIRE initiative was the importance of creating opportunities for these often separate faculty and staff to come together, learn from each other, better understand one another's roles, and begin developing solutions to problems affecting their shared students. The theory of integrating academics and student services remains just that

---

<sup>1</sup>See Asera, 2008, p. 10, for an interesting and cogent list of coordinators' skills and responsibilities.

— theory — in the absence of concrete steps to change the working relationships among instructional and student services faculty and staff.

In different ways, all nine SSPIRE colleges recognized and took on this task. In so doing they addressed a common problem: Instructional and student services faculty and staff often have little daily involvement with one another. In many cases they are unaware of the roles their colleagues in other departments or divisions play and the challenges they face as they independently work with students. Likewise, many individuals are often unaware of ways in which they could collaborate or why it might be beneficial.

Three promising approaches emerged at the SSPIRE colleges to encourage the collaboration of instructional and student services faculty and staff:

- *Providing professional development activities with both instructional and student services faculty and staff in attendance.* In professional development activities, topics of interest to both groups often serve as a jumping-off point for additional learning and interaction; the faculty seminars at De Anza and Santa Ana illustrate the benefits of this approach.
- *Holding regular meetings that bring together staff (and often senior staff) to work across separate disciplines and divisions.* Throughout the time when their programs were being planned, operated, and assessed, the colleges benefited from including faculty and staff from both instructional and student services divisions. At Santa Ana, for instance, deans from all divisions meet several times each semester regarding the learning communities program and related SSPIRE activities, providing the program coordinators regular access to — and support from — a range of divisional resources on campus. Similar meetings have been organized at Alameda among faculty and staff who are engaged in various programs focused on increasing student success.
- *Working collaboratively among the academic instructors and student services faculty and staff who are directly involved in the program.* When faculty and staff from instructional and student services divisions work together as teaching teams in classrooms or in other settings, such as Merced's Study Central or Pasadena's TLC, the integration of instruction and services for students is more likely to occur.

## **Using Data to Understand Student Progress**

The specific programs the colleges designed and implemented, and their related practices, are the key focus of the SSPIRE initiative but not the only one. An important complemen-

tary aim of SSPIRE has been to enhance the colleges' abilities to make better use of data and data analysis to enrich their understanding, guide their work in promoting student success, and begin to measure trends in student achievement.

As part of the SSPIRE initiative, colleges surveyed their students using the national Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), began working with Cal-PASS, and used other data to better understand and improve their programs. Based on their experiences, several lessons about the use of data emerged in the course of the initiative:

- *Having instructional and student services faculty and staff review data together can benefit programs in several ways:* First, and most simply, reviewing data can spark useful dialogue at the college. In the case of SSPIRE, this dialogue often appeared most productive when faculty and staff from both instructional and student services divisions came together to discuss and share their interpretations. Second, data can inform the design and improvement of programs and practices. And finally, data can be used to promote existing programs and practices, secure funding, and make a case for the institutionalization of programs.
- *Qualitative data — particularly student voices — can often be as useful as quantitative outcome data when seeking to understand students' academic experiences and their needs for support services.* Several of the programs benefited greatly from focus groups and other methods of learning about students and their college experiences. Classroom observations and surveys or focus groups of faculty and students often reveal insights and lessons that cannot be found in quantitative outcome data. Merced's program, for instance, was regularly modified based on feedback from students and faculty.
- *Several of the colleges found suggestive evidence of student success and persistence, which they attributed to their SSPIRE programs.* Some of these findings are detailed in this report (particularly for Merced and De Anza), and some of the other colleges also produced similar findings. On average, none of the SSPIRE programs appear to have led to dramatic changes in success rates for all of the students in the program; rather, there tended to be evidence that some students were helped by the programs, and average success and persistence rates may have increased incrementally. This level of improvement was what would be expected, given the level of investment. Moreover, as noted in Chapter 1, rigorous evaluations of other programs to promote the success of community college students have found results of a



similar magnitude, identifying modest but positive impacts on several important outcomes.

These program results must be interpreted carefully and with regard to the characteristics of the students served. When examining the success rates or other outcomes of a group of students (such as those in a particular class or program), it is essential to consider who these students are and how they were selected or enrolled in the group. For example, the students who participated in Pasadena's Math Jam were targeted based on the belief that they were less likely than other students to succeed in math, and they were encouraged to take math classes they might not otherwise have attempted. Knowing this, expectations for the success rates of these students should be very different than for some other groups of students at the college. When defining and understanding comparison groups, it is essential that differences in groups of students be understood and considered.

SSPIRE was not designed to include a rigorous evaluation of the programs developed or enhanced under the initiative. Without such evaluations, it is impossible to know for certain the impact of the SSPIRE programs on student outcomes. But as noted above, even without rigorous evaluations, programs such as these can benefit greatly from better understanding the characteristics and perspectives of the students they serve and tracking their progress. Future efforts might also benefit from additional data that are often difficult for community colleges to gather; in particular, the ability to use students' high school transcripts and college placement test scores in analyses would likely advance colleges' capacity to understand, assess, and improve their efforts to increase student success.

## **What's Next? Assessing the Potential for Growth, Sustainability, and Institutional Change**

Funding for the colleges from the SSPIRE initiative ended in early 2009. But in some ways, the programs and practices fostered by SSPIRE continue to have a presence on the campuses. This section summarizes the scale and potential for growth of the nine programs, information on whether the programs are being continued after the SSPIRE grant ends, and evidence of broader change on the campuses as a result of SSPIRE.

### **Scale and Potential for Growth**

What has been learned about the potential for different SSPIRE models to reach greater numbers of students and continue to grow after the SSPIRE initiative ends? The colleges' experiences in SSPIRE suggest that enhancing existing programs, such as learning communities, has the potential to reach larger numbers of students more quickly — the examples of De Anza and Santa Ana illustrate this. In these settings, student support services can be worked

into instructional programs that are already well established and have a substantial reach; the result is larger numbers of students served but not necessarily at substantially greater cost. It should be noted, though, that enhancing well-established programs, while it avoids the potential difficulties of creating wholly new systems and practices, produces change that is most likely to be incremental.

Learning communities established as part of SSPIRE, such as those at Alameda and American River, initially served fewer students, which is not surprising, since both setting up learning communities and integrating academic and support services can take time to accomplish. But as suggested particularly by the experience at Alameda, these programs can continue to grow.

New programs established at Victor Valley and Taft reflect a different approach, geared more to case management concentrated on a smaller number of students and a somewhat more intensive level of interaction with program faculty and staff. Whatever benefits this approach offers to students, it is more difficult to expand without substantially adding staff and cost. There are simply limits to how far the staff-student ratio can be stretched without compromising the nature of support for students. And costly (on a per-student basis) programs that appear to serve fewer students can be more difficult to justify and sustain in times of tight budgets.

### **Sustainability and the Future of the SSPIRE Programs and Practices**

In addition to supporting programs and promoting student success during the grant period, an aim of SSPIRE was to produce programs and practices that would have staying power on their campuses and that would, in time, be institutionalized. The progression from pilot or demonstration stage to an established part of a college's overall offerings brings up the challenge of moving beyond "soft money" to a permanent funding source. Community college budgets usually mix established, long-term, largely reliable core streams of funding (including state and local support, as well as tuition or fees) with grant and other special funding sources; the latter are typically less reliable and of shorter duration. Indeed, all the participating colleges supplemented their SSPIRE grants to some degree with other support — from their core resources, in-kind contributions, and sometimes other sources of soft money — but not as a permanent feature of the college's budget, and with no guarantee of long-term support.

Thus, a major question for SSPIRE, as grant funding comes to an end, is if and how the colleges are making their new programs and practices permanent when the grant funds are spent. Sustainability of this sort will be particularly challenging in California in 2009, when the near- and mid-term outlook for state funding support is not encouraging, and community colleges are expected to be under sustained budgetary pressures for the foreseeable future. But, as noted throughout this report, many programs and practices that were established as part of

SSPIRE are being continued and sometimes expanded, despite budgetary uncertainties. Whether programs and practices are sustained appears to depend on several factors:

- *College leaders who are knowledgeable about and committed to the program.* As noted earlier, champions can play a pivotal role in advocating for the program, helping to convince their peers of its value, and identifying alternative sources of funding to replace the seed funding provided by the grant.
- *Well-documented program results.* Even the most fervent advocate of a program, at whatever level within the college hierarchy, will be challenged to defend continued funding of that program without evidence of its effectiveness. Such evidence is particularly important in budget deliberations, when the “cost-benefit” discussion is likely to hinge on whether a new program constitutes a worthwhile investment, or merely an additional cost. Accordingly, the evidence should ideally document not just a program’s short-term results, but also its effects on student persistence. This measure reflects the college’s ability to hold or expand its student census — in many cases, a revenue-generating benefit to the college.
- *Understanding the program’s cost and revenue implications.* Complex funding structures can have an important role in determining which program models can be financially sustained over time. For example, a new formal course — such as American River’s integrated reading and writing — generates state funding for the college for each student in the class, whereas the not-for-credit Math Jam at Pasadena does not, and must be paid for through other means.

A tension thus often raised in grant-funded programs is how to resolve the contrast between the program’s design and the concrete funding structures that exist, which may limit the feasibility of sustaining these programs when the grant ends. The first challenge is to understand what these structures are and how they will affect the program when the grant expires. The second challenge is then to either find new flexible funds or to reshape the program’s components to fit within the limitations of existing funding streams.<sup>2</sup>

As grant funding comes to an end, it is also worth noting ways in which the principles SSPIRE fostered have informed other programs and practices on the campuses. The scope of

---

<sup>2</sup>The Basic Skills Initiative can be seen as an element of the state’s response to this challenge, in that it provides community college districts with new flexible funding that can — and often does — support programs such as SSPIRE. But these funds are relatively modest, and like other grant funds, their continued existence is not guaranteed.

these changes is hard to assess, and in no case do they appear to have drastically altered structures and relationships across an entire campus. However, as noted throughout this report, colleges made many small but meaningful changes. For example, the integration of instruction and student services that took place in the programs — and the collaborative relationships that developed during this work — have helped lead in some cases to new ways of working together across disciplines and between instructional and student services divisions. This is particularly apparent in many of the strategies colleges developed to meet the goals of the Basic Skills Initiative, which are tapping into the knowledge and experience of faculty, staff, and administrators who were involved in the SSPIRE programs. Another example can be found in programs that targeted particular populations of students, leading to a better understanding of these underrepresented students among many faculty.

The early accomplishments that have been documented by the SSPIRE colleges and the strong commitment of many of the colleges to the SSPIRE programs and practices raise prospects for their continuation. Moreover, the lessons from the SSPIRE initiative can contribute to current efforts to help developmental-level students succeed in community colleges in the state and across the nation.

Appendix

## **Research Methods and Data Sources**



To gather qualitative data about the SSPIRE programs, MDRC conducted two rounds of structured field research that included interviews with faculty, staff, and administrators, focus groups with students, and observations of the programs in action. The first round of field research took place in 2007. In spring 2007, two-day visits were conducted by a two-person research team at eight of the colleges: College of Alameda, De Anza College, Merced College, Mt. San Antonio College (Mt. SAC), Pasadena City College, Santa Ana College, Taft College, and Victor Valley College. A similar team visited American River College in fall 2007. The second round of field research covered a subset of the colleges (American River, Alameda, De Anza, Mt. SAC, and Santa Ana) and took place in spring 2008. The interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and extensive notes were taken. The visits were written up by the research teams, and these write-ups were analyzed in order to better understand the process of implementing the programs at each of the colleges and the experiences of the students, faculty, staff, and administrators who had been involved in the programs.

In addition to the field research visits, MDRC staff visited each college at least two times over the course of the grant and were in regular contact with the program coordinators and administrators to provide technical assistance. These visits and contacts further contributed to MDRC's knowledge about the programs. MDRC also met with the colleges at the annual all-site conferences, held semiregular all-site conference calls, and conducted themed "cluster" meetings with subsets of the colleges. The annual Strengthening Student Success conference proved to be an excellent opportunity for MDRC and the program staff to meet and to jointly present on the work being done under SSPIRE.

As the grant manager for the initiative, MDRC received biannual reports from the colleges chronicling their progress and their expenditures. Data presented in the report on the costs for the programs are based on these expenditure reports, as well as on follow-up conversations with program coordinators and administrators.

The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) and the Community College Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (CCFSSE) were administered at all nine SSPIRE colleges in spring 2007, along with about 300 institutions nationwide. CCSSE is designed to provide colleges with a reliable indicator of student engagement, by asking questions about institutional practices and student behaviors that are correlated highly with student learning and student retention. CCFSSE is an online survey that invites all faculty teaching CCSSE-eligible courses at participating colleges to contribute their frontline perspectives on student engagement. In addition to participating in the national administration of CCSSE, five of the SSPIRE colleges (American River, De Anza, Mt. SAC, Santa Ana, and Victor Valley) worked with CCSSE to oversample their SSPIRE courses. Data from the administration of CCSSE are included throughout the report.

The SSPIRE colleges participated in workshops at the 2008 annual SSPIRE conference to discuss the CCSSE results. In addition, six of the nine SSPIRE colleges held on-campus workshops with faculty and administrators to discuss the CCSSE and CCFSSSE results. MDRC and CCSSE staff played facilitating roles throughout the initiative to help the colleges understand and interpret. The SSPIRE colleges are also participating in the 2009 administration of CCSSE and CCFSSSE.

The California Partnership for Achieving Student Success (Cal-PASS) creates regional partnerships among K-12 schools, community colleges, and universities through the sharing of student transcripts and performance information. Over 6,000 educational institutions across California annually submit student-level data to a central Cal-PASS database that is compliant with the federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA); the data are encrypted to ensure that all privacy requirements are met. Each student receives a unique identification number, based on unchanging demographic data, in the Cal-PASS system to allow tracking across educational segments. During the course of the initiative, the SSPIRE colleges and MDRC had access to these data as presented by Cal-PASS, which included means by which the colleges could track the students who had participated in the SSPIRE programs. The student demographic data in the report come from Cal-PASS. Student outcome data, as presented in the sections that describe how the colleges used data, also come primarily from Cal-PASS. In some cases, these data also come from internal college research as provided to MDRC by program staff or institutional researchers at the college.

Readers should be aware that unlike most MDRC evaluations, SSPIRE did not involve random assignment of students to program and control groups to measure the effect, or “value added,” of SSPIRE over existing programs and services. The student outcomes presented in this report are intended to illustrate how the colleges themselves are gathering and using data to determine whether their programs are headed in the right direction and to identify where further improvements may be warranted.



## References

- Asera, Rose. 2008. "Change and Sustain/Ability: A Program Director's Reflections on Institutional Learning." *Strengthening Pre-collegiate Education in Community Colleges (SPECC)*. Stanford, CA: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.
- Boaler, Jo. 1998. "Alternative Approaches to Teaching, Learning and Assessing Mathematics." *Evaluation and Program Planning* 21: 129-141.
- California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office. 2002. *Chancellor's Office Report: California Community Colleges Extended Opportunity Programs and Services and Cooperative Agencies Resources for Education 2001-2002*. Sacramento: California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office.
- California Community College League. 2009. "Fast Facts 2009." Sacramento: California Community College League.
- California Community Colleges System Office. 2008a. *Focus on Results: Accountability Reporting for the Community Colleges*. A Report to the Legislature, Pursuant to AB 1417. Sacramento: California Community Colleges System Office.
- California Community Colleges System Office. 2008b. "Systems Office Description." Web site: <http://www.cccco.edu/SystemOffice/tabid/179/Default.aspx>
- Center for Student Success. 2007. *Basic Skills as a Foundation for Student Success in California Community Colleges*. (Second Edition, July). Sacramento: The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges.
- EdSource. 2008. *High School to Community College: New Efforts to Build Shared Expectations*. (November). Mountain View, CA: EdSource.
- Engstrom, Cathy McHugh, and Vincent Tinto. 2008. "Learning Better Together: The Impact of Learning Communities on the Persistence of Low-Income Students." *Opportunity Matters* 1: 5-21.
- Fulks, Janet, and Marcy Alancraig (Eds). 2008. *Constructing a Framework for Success: A Holistic Approach to Basic Skills*. Sacramento: Academic Senate for California Community Colleges. Web site: <http://www.cccbsi.org/basic-skills-handbook>. Accessed April 9, 2009.
- Grubb, W. Norton. 2001. *Getting Into the World: Guidance and Counseling in Community Colleges*. New York: Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University.
- Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). 2008. IPEDS College Data 2006-2007. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences.

- Moore, Colleen, and Nancy Shulock, with Miguel Ceja and David M. Lang. 2007. *Beyond the Open Door: Increasing Student Success in the California Community Colleges*. Sacramento: The Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy, California State University, Sacramento.
- Moyer, Patricia S., and M. Gail Jones. 2001. "Controlling Choice: Teachers, Students and Manipulations in Mathematics Classrooms." *School Science and Mathematics* 104, 1: 16-31.
- Purnell, Rogéair, and Susan Blank, with Susan Scrivener and Reishma Seupersad. 2004. *Support Success: Services That May Help Low-Income Students Succeed in Community College*. New York: MDRC.
- Rao, Deepa. 2005. "What Can We Learn From Developmental Reading Research in Postsecondary Education?" Research to Practice Brief No. 2. National College Transition Network. Boston: World Education, Inc.
- Scrivener, Susan, Dan Bloom, Allen LeBlanc, Christina Paxson, Cecilia Elena Rouse, and Colleen Sommo, with Jenny Au, Jedediah J. Teres, and Susan Yeh. 2008. *A Good Start: Two-Year Effects of a Freshmen Learning Community Program at Kingsborough Community College*. New York: MDRC.
- Scrivener, Susan, Colleen Sommo, and Herbert Collado. 2009. *Getting Back on Track: Effects of a Community College Program for Probationary Students*. New York: MDRC.
- Shulock, Nancy, Colleen Moore, Jeremy Offenstein, and Mary Kirlin. 2008. *It Could Happen: Unleashing the Potential of California's Community Colleges to Help Students Succeed and California Thrive*. Sacramento: The Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy, California State University, Sacramento.
- Smith, Barbara Leigh, and Lee Burdette Williams. 2007. *Learning Communities and Student Affairs: Partnering for Powerful Learning*. Learning Communities & Educational Reform. Olympia, WA: Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education, The Evergreen State College.
- SSPIRE. 2005a. Proposal from Pasadena City College. Unpublished.
- SSPIRE. 2005b. Proposal from Taft College. Unpublished.
- SSPIRE 2005c. Proposal from Victor Valley College. Unpublished.
- The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. 2008. *Strengthening Pre-Collegiate Education in Community Colleges: Project Summary and Recommendations*. Stanford, CA: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.
- The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges and the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, 2008. "Strengthening Student Success: Basic Skills and Beyond." Conference agenda. Web site: <http://www/rpgroup.org/SuccessConf-Main.htm>
- Visher, Mary G., Heather Wathington, Lashawn Richburg-Hayes, and Emily Schneider, with Oscar Cerna, Christine Sansone, and Michelle Ware. 2008. *The Learning Communities Demonstration: Rationale, Sites, and Research Design*. New York: MDRC.

Woodlief, Blaze, Catherine Thomas, and Garciela Orozco. 2003. *California's Gold: Claiming the Promise of Diversity in Our Colleges*. Oakland: California Tomorrow.

Zeidenberg, Matthew, Davis Jenkins, and Juan Carlos Calcagno. 2007. "Do Student Success Courses Actually Help Community College Students Succeed?" CCRC Brief No. 36 (June). New York: Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University.



## About MDRC

MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social policy research organization dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through its research and the active communication of its findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs.

Founded in 1974 and located in New York City and Oakland, California, MDRC is best known for mounting rigorous, large-scale, real-world tests of new and existing policies and programs. Its projects are a mix of demonstrations (field tests of promising new program approaches) and evaluations of ongoing government and community initiatives. MDRC's staff bring an unusual combination of research and organizational experience to their work, providing expertise on the latest in qualitative and quantitative methods and on program design, development, implementation, and management. MDRC seeks to learn not just whether a program is effective but also how and why the program's effects occur. In addition, it tries to place each project's findings in the broader context of related research — in order to build knowledge about what works across the social and education policy fields. MDRC's findings, lessons, and best practices are proactively shared with a broad audience in the policy and practitioner community as well as with the general public and the media.

Over the years, MDRC has brought its unique approach to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. Once known primarily for evaluations of state welfare-to-work programs, today MDRC is also studying public school reforms, employment programs for ex-offenders and people with disabilities, and programs to help low-income students succeed in college. MDRC's projects are organized into five areas:

- Promoting Family Well-Being and Child Development
- Improving Public Education
- Promoting Successful Transitions to Adulthood
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Working in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada and the United Kingdom, MDRC conducts its projects in partnership with national, state, and local governments, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.